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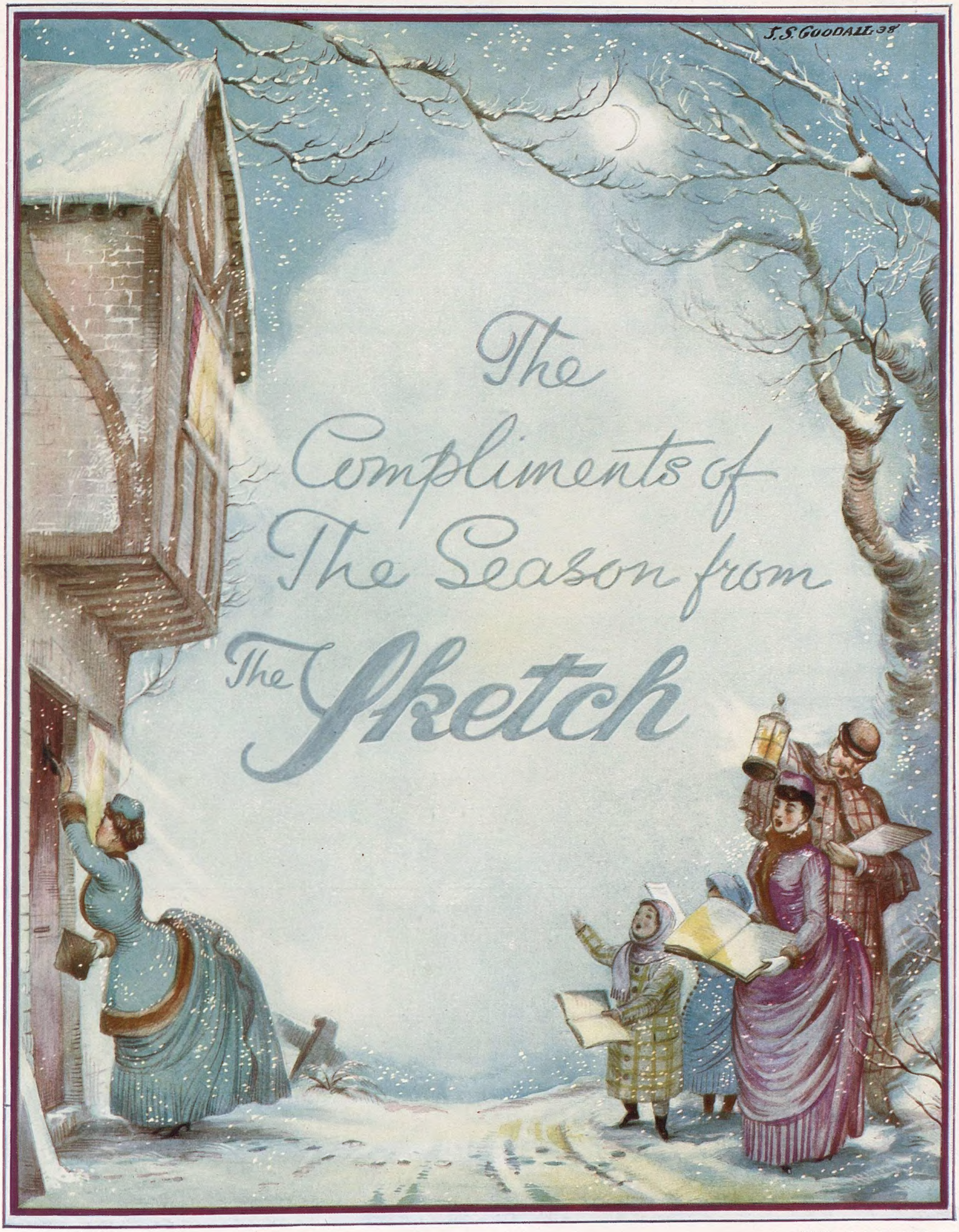

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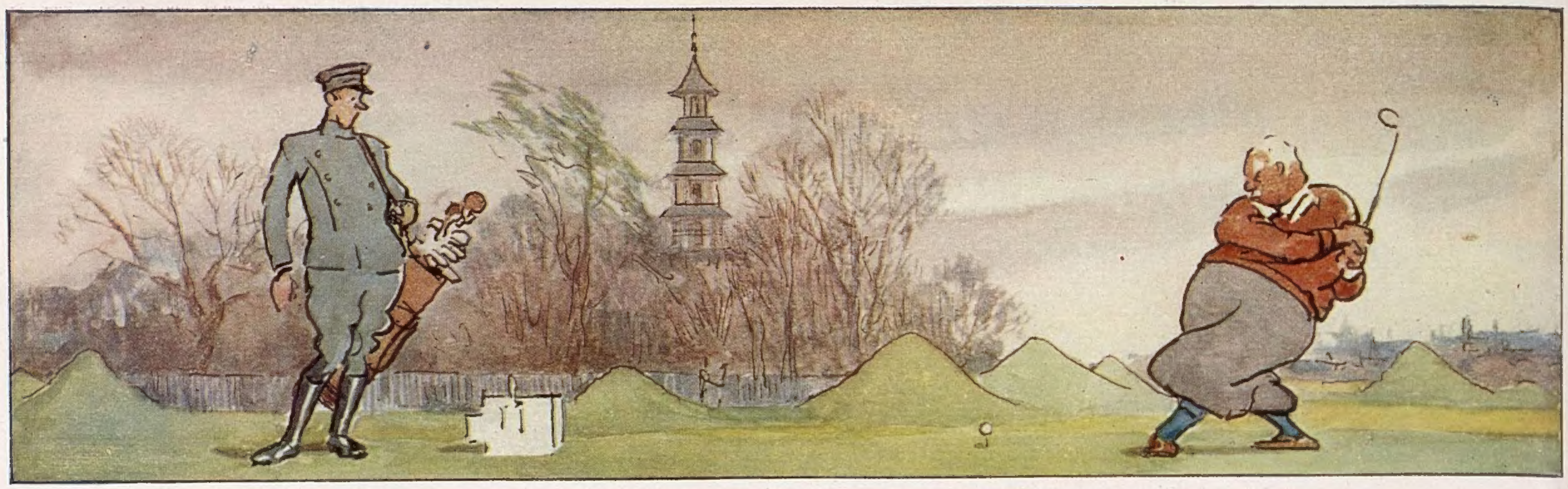

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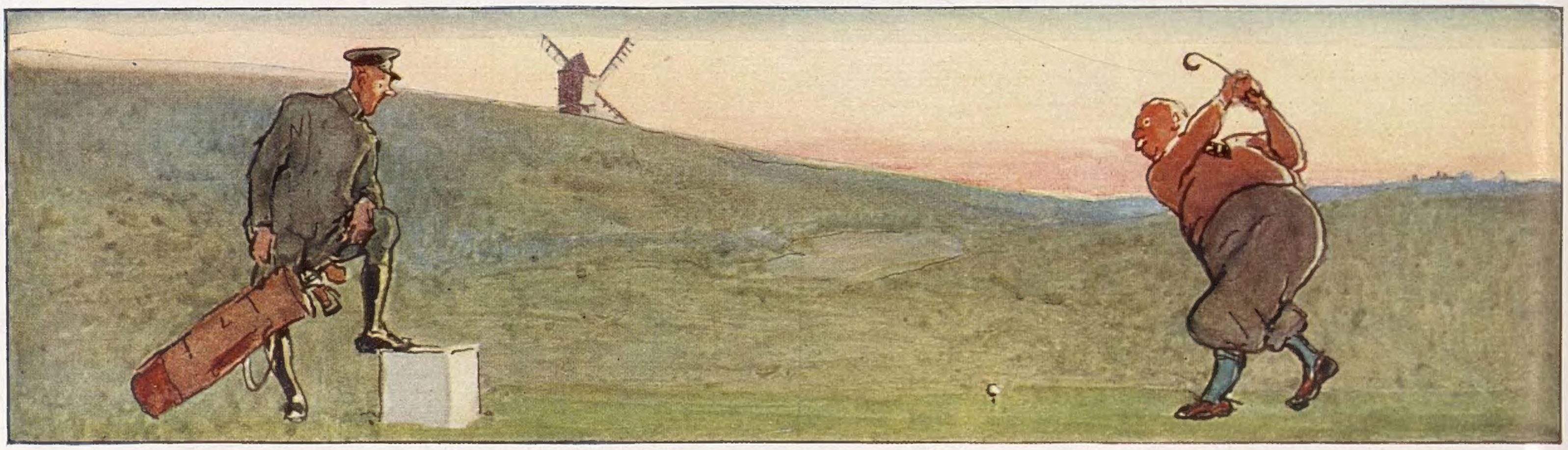
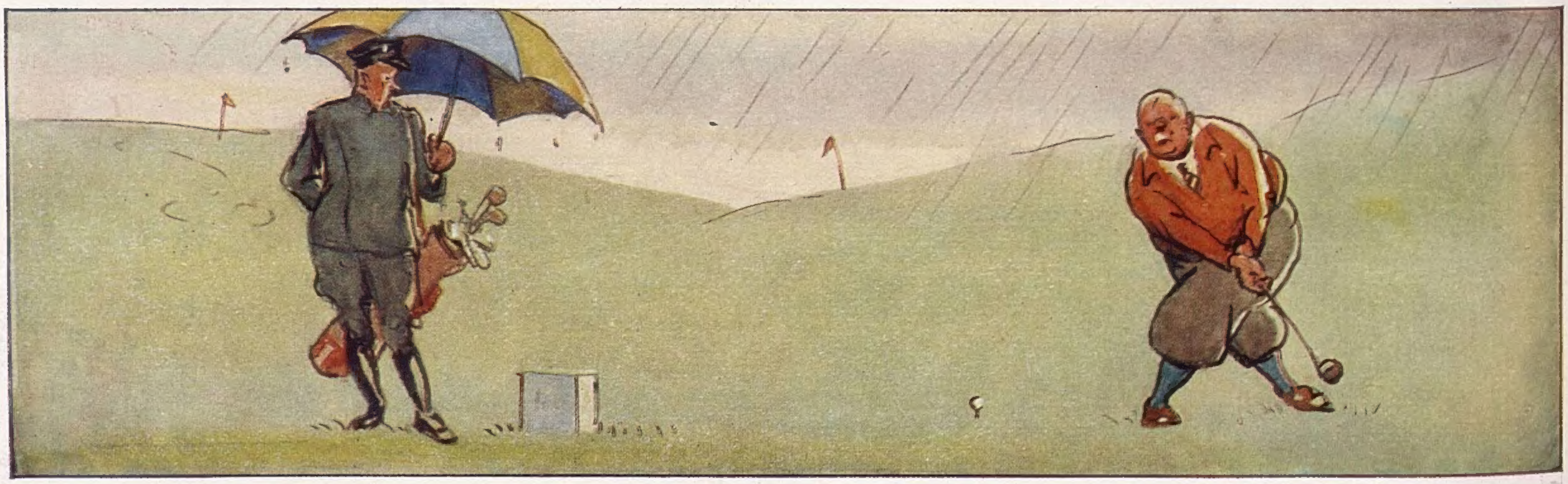


WALTON HEATH—

HOYLAKE—

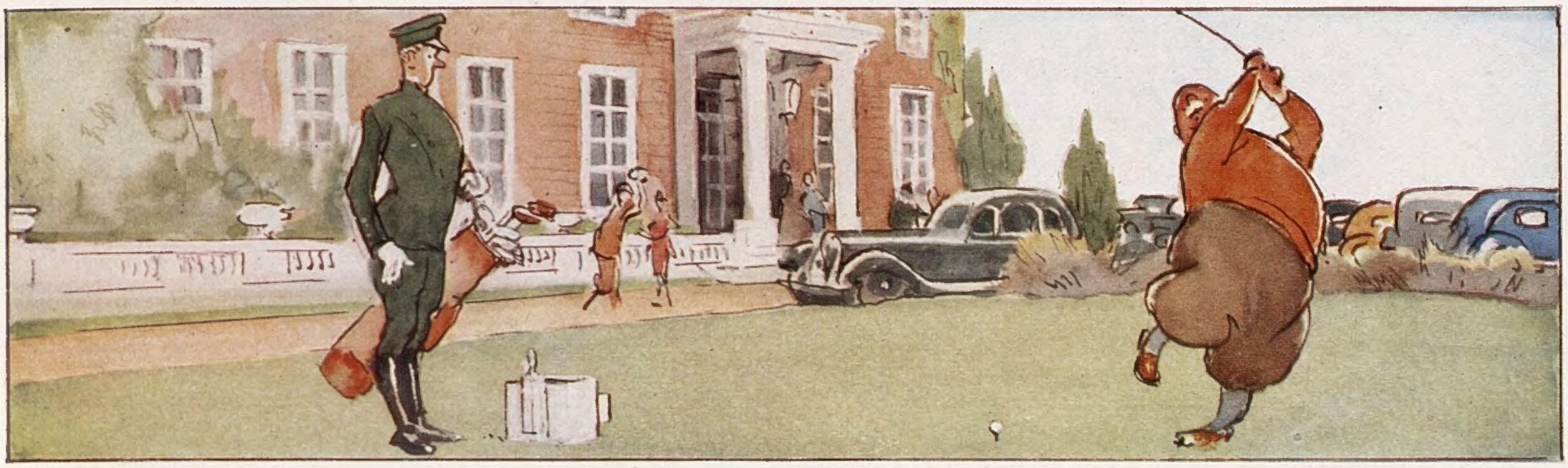


ST. ANDREWS—

AND SO SAY

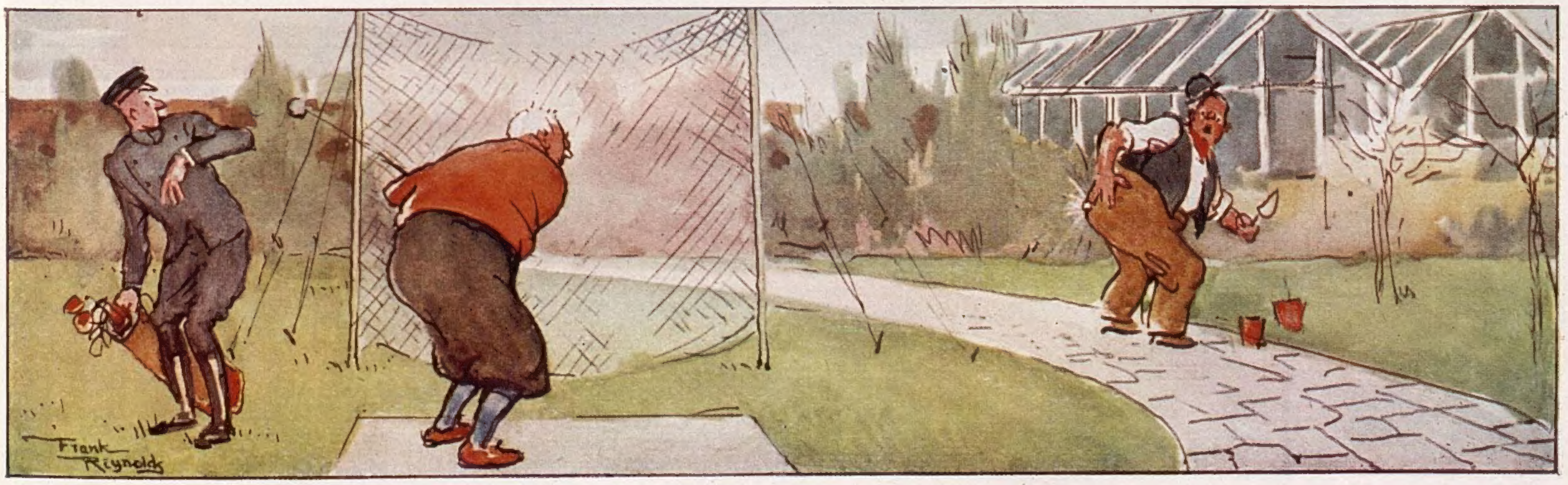
DRAWINGS BY

ON SQUALID COURSES—



GRAND ONES—

AND ABROAD—WITH NO SUCCESS.



IN MY OWN GARDEN I JUST CAN'T MISS IT.

ALL OF US!

FRANK REYNOLDS.

THE NEW DRESS.

DRAWN BY R. M. TURVEY.

"Come and Dine With Me"

By MARGUERITE STEEN,

Author of "MATADOR", "WHO WOULD HAVE DAUGHTERS", "THE MARRIAGE WILL NOT TAKE PLACE."

Illustrated by — STEVEN SPURRIER R.B.A.

A figure in an overcoat, sunk into the iron Park seat.

THE dinner-party had strange preliminaries: a fog, twining like tobacco-smoke between the winter-bitten trunks of trees; a figure in an overcoat, sunk into the iron Park seat as though surrendered beyond reclaim to the savagery of the weather; and another figure, that came swiftly out of the fog as though born of the fog—starting like a hare from the motionless being on the seat.

It paused; it hovered, its eye upon the hunched figure: for in this little lagoon of partial clarity it was obvious that the figure was not that of one of those miserables who alone might be expected to seek such repose at the dusk of a winter's afternoon. The overcoat was thick, its material rich and handsomely cut; the scarf which bulged above the collar into which was sunk its owner's face was of closely patterned silk, and the hands which lay so limply in the sleeper's lap were covered with thick doeskin gloves.

That combination of affluence and indifference to common comfort held something ominous, if not fearful, even to nerves as seasoned as Peter Garth's. He was not at all surprised, on touching him, to find that the man was dead.

A corpse, on Christmas Eve. It wasn't seasonable, thought Peter, reproachfully. He had a nice regard for the amenities of the season. But he had a nicer perception of what his own situation might be if he were discovered in the fog partnering a dead man. It was a thing that would take a devil of a lot of explaining away, even by the most blameless citizen. Though blameless, Peter was sensitive, as an out-of-work actor may well be, to his publicity. He was also most intolerably hungry. . . .

"Welcome, little strangers!" was Peter's greeting, an hour or so later, as he sat over a roaring fire which an astonished landlady had produced, in return for a most unexpected settlement of her bill. The "little strangers," who partnered each other on a dingy table-cloth, were a bottle of Scotch and a syphon: both so long absent from Peter's housekeeping accounts that their presence called for formal acknowledgment. Leaning quickly forward, he replenished his glass—for the third time. It was safe enough, on top of the excellent lunch he had just enjoyed—the first for several days. And it took more than a few Scotch-and-sodas to restore one's equilibrium after an experience like that in the Park.

Desperate, that's what he had been. And desperation leads sooner or later, as any human being knows, to crime. Nevertheless, the knowledge that one has crossed the Rubicon between law and outlaw shakes the nerves a little. For quite a while now Peter had been shivering on the brink; without being precisely marked down as "a wrong 'un," a good many people regarded him as a slightly shifty customer. Just little things: carelessness about change, dressing-room losses—oh, nothing valuable: a few cigarettes, oddments from the make-up tray—which were never satisfactorily explained while Peter was in the theatre. Money, too; but in such trifling amounts that no one had the nerve to accuse the debonair Peter Garth of complicity in its disappearance.

Still, that was different from thrusting one's hand into the pockets of a dead man. Even his war experience had not helped to keep Peter's teeth from chattering as he gave way to the shameful impulse. "I'm sorry, old man—but I've got to eat, somehow!" he muttered, as his fingers found that which they sought.

In addition to the money the pocket-book contained various papers, including an unstamped and unposted letter, and an opened envelope which gave Peter the name of his prey: Richard Waldron, Esq., 18a, Royal Mansions, W.9. Acquainted as he was with "Who's Who," the name raised no echo in Peter's mind. A well-to-do nobody; so much the better. There would be less hullabaloo in the Press when the tragedy in the Park was discovered.

The envelope contained a modest sheet of white paper, headed by what is usually called a "good" address in Regent's Park; but the handwriting was old-fashioned and even a little uneducated—a fact which explained itself in the course of the letter.

MY DEAR RICHARD [it began],

It is so long—thirty years, no less!—since we met that I hardly hope you will remember me, though I have vivid recollections of a handsome lad in his twenties whose companionship afforded some hours of pleasure to rather a lonely person. I wonder how many times in the last few years we have passed in the street without recognising each other!—for I remember what you described to me as your old haunts, and up to a short time ago I went occasionally to see if by any chance I should meet with some reminder of the Richard Waldron of bygone days.

The papers have told me of recent losses in your family, which lead me to suppose that you, as well as I, may be passing a solitary Christmas. If this is so, come and dine with me. I can promise you a good glass of wine and a welcome that has not grown cooler with the passing years.

Owing to disabilities which you will realise when we are together, I am now dependent upon a servant for my correspondence. Do not, therefore, trouble to reply. On Christmas Day a dinner for two will be on the table at eight precisely, and if you do not claim your share of it, your empty place will be toasted by a loving old friend.

JO GRANT.

An acceleration of curiosity turned Peter's attention to the other, sealed but unaddressed, letter. Tearing it open, he read, to his surprise, a brief and formal refusal of the invitation:

All the characters and incidents in this story are imaginary.

Dear Jo,

I regret that a previous engagement prevents me from dining with you on Christmas night. Regards.

R. Waldron.

It seemed a curmudgeonly return for so warm an expression of good will. Peter folded it thoughtfully and brooded on the position. Had the dead man changed his mind, that the note remained unposted until it was too late to rely upon Christmas delivery? Or had it been his intention to forward it by messenger to the "good" address in Regent's Park?

The envelope contained a modest sheet of white paper, headed by what is usually called a "good" address in Regent's Park.

All his sense of the theatre was alert as the prospect of a dinner for two became more and more attractive to one whose dislike for his own company was only matched by the disinclination of others to share it. Peter had spent positively his last five shillings—before the unexpected windfall—in treating some of the "boys" who he thought might be good for an invitation to join the Christmas revels; and they had drunk his beers and been prodigal of "old chaps" and "old sons," and never suggested so much as a friendly drink on Christmas morning! The rotters!—in work, too, most of them. So much for the garbage that was talked about generosity among actors! Peter gritted his teeth as he thought what he would give to be free of the theatre for good.

Well . . . the only way was to take chances, when they offered. Risky, of course: but as an adventure—a bit of drama—the situation appealed to him. He glanced back at the first line of the letter: thirty years ago, and "a handsome lad in his twenties"—that meant at least fifty-three. A bit of make-up ought to fix it—especially as the old boy admitted the unlikelihood of their recognising each other when they met. Some sentimental and decrepit old fellow, with a taste for good wine. Emptying his glass, Peter drove the stopper firmly into the Haig. A pity to spoil one's palate with, perhaps, a Châteauneuf du Pape or a Chambertin '23 in the offing!

Picking up the telephone directory, he sought for the name of Grant; but of the 397 Grants it contained, there was none whose address corresponded to the one at the head of the notepaper—which made him wonder for a while if the letter was a hoax. He came, however, to the conclusion that it was simply that of some eccentric old fellow who, for old-fashioned reasons, would not have the telephone in the house; he could not recall any Grant so famous that, for reasons of self-protection, he would not allow his name to go into the book.

The dreariness of a Christmas Day which brought Peter to the verge of suicide with solitude, sentimental yearnings and anxiety for the future was brightened towards dusk with anticipation of the adventure ahead. The clock of a nearby church was just chiming the hour of eight when he found himself in front of a dignified Georgian façade on the north side of the park. The elderly maidservant who admitted him—he had expected to see a butler—evidently had her instructions, for he was relieved of his hat and coat without being asked to give his name.

A dimly opulent mirror gave him a gratifying reflection; the touch of grey he had added over his temples lent distinction to his looks, and the shaded lights were kind to a make-up which he now felt might have been a little heavier. Still, one never knew: one might be ushered into some blazing drawing-room—not very likely, he reflected, as he followed his elderly guide up a flight of heavily padded stairs. What a set for Galsworthian drama! The house was a house of age; tradition brooded upon its walls; the very tick of the clocks seemed set to a *rallentando*, as though the pulse of the house itself were slackening towards its cessation. Against his will, Peter experienced a slight uneasiness: the uneasiness of lath and plaster and tinsel brought into conjunction with the substances of diuturnity.

As the servant quietly opened a door, he straightened his spine and drew down the points of his vest. He was about to make an entrance, in the rôle of a man he had never seen alive! It was rather like a first night, with the added horror of having to improvise one's lines.

"Mr. Waldron," murmured the old voice of his escort, and, throwing up his chin, arranging his smile, as though to meet the plaudits of the gallery (which, one must confess, had never been deeply stirred by Peter), he stepped briskly forward.

"Ah! So I am not to dine alone."

For a matter of seconds Peter "dried up." It had never entered his mind that the writer of the letter could be a woman. Rallying quickly, and feeling it was the only possible gesture for such an occasion, he advanced to kiss the hand she extended towards him. Over his head he heard a chuckle, and a voice like the twanging of an old harp said: "Well, Richard! So you've become a courtier since the old days!"

He realised he had made a mistake; that the real Waldron had not gone in for courtly gestures. Smiling, wondering what to reply, he ventured an upward glance, and was struck by the extraordinary size and clearness of her eyes. Pale, almost, as water, and uncanny in their expression of clear-seeing, they were the one beautiful feature left in a little ruined face. Peter felt that if he could get past those eyes he could get past anything. But they showed no shadow of misgiving, as they gazed at him, innocent as daylight in the tired, experienced face, with its traces of careless make-up and its loose halo of iron-grey hair. For the rest of her, it was like a little heap of dust, held together by a web of old, dark lace—purple or black or steel-coloured, Peter could not tell which in the uncertain light. He only knew that something about this strange, this unexpected figure, afflicted him with so powerful a sense of inferiority that, for a few seconds, he actually meditated flight and the abandonment of his graceless escapade.

"Sit down, sit down," she was saying. "It irks me when people stand to talk to me: it reminds me of days when my own feet ached with standing—ay, ay, how meek I was then!—to listen to Karpilov's endless discourses. Then—up and down, up and

down! I must have walked twenty miles in a single one of his rehearsals. What a brute!—and what a producer! They say he had Cossack blood in him . . ."

So she, too, had belonged to the theatre! The information did nothing to set Peter at his ease. He had had plenty of opportunity of proving what every small-part actor knows—that the "freemasonry of art" does not apply in the theatre; he had writhed too often beneath snubs from people in the higher ranks of his profession to base any foolish claims to her complaisance upon their mutual art.

"You will excuse this improvised dining-room"—a faint rolling of the r's gave an exotic flavour to the words—"but I find the stairs too much nowadays for a weary heart and unsteady knees!"

Murmuring something, Peter could hardly take his eyes from the table, whereon, dominated by the immense candelabra, was displayed such a panoply of riches as suggested even to his unaccustomed eye dinner with an Archduchess. There were fantastic things on the table; a jewelled pheasant supported on outspread wings a handful of salted almonds; the gold filigree handles of the spoons had knotted into their airy convolutions a cypher surmounted by an Imperial crown; a *bonbonnière* beside his plate was studded with immense, improbable rubies and sapphires. Besides these objects, which had utilitarianism as well as ornament to commend them, were various conceits in rock crystal and rose-coloured quartz; languishing nymphs and plump amorini—the kind of thing Peter had seen, without admiring them particularly, in the antique jewellers around St. James's, and knew to be valuable and sought by connoisseurs. And, as she sat talking to him, her hand went out from time to time, seeking and finding one of these little objects that she would fondle for a moment and then relinquish, as though content to be assured, by touching it, that it was still there, in her possession. It came to him that she had a deep and hungry love for her treasures.

The rest of the room was in deep shadow, and it was some time before Peter's eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness beyond the candlelight, and made out that it was sparsely, even poorly, furnished, and that the carpet, in many places, was threadbare. It would be a melancholy little room, he fancied, by light of day.

The food was not very good, or very well prepared, but the wine was beyond criticism. Gradually, as its lovely aroma mounted to his head, Peter began to gather confidence and to enjoy his adventure. It was certainly a piquant situation, and he flattered himself that, so far, he had creditably supported his share of it. It was not difficult; his companion needed little but monosyllables to prompt her soft, inconsequent flow of reminiscence, which began to give Peter his bearings.

There seemed to be no capital she did not know: the frayed, silken skein of her memory looped itself round Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Madrid; flew out to draw New York and Buenos Aires into the magic circle. Kings, princes, statesmen figured as casually in her narrative as though they were cab-drivers—often by some intimate "*petit nom*" for which she excused herself: "It is really an impertinence to call him that, now we no longer know each other," she said once. Who was this Jo Grant? And how came she by this astounding acquaintance with the great ones of the earth? Absently fingering one of the little crystal figures, Peter tried to puzzle it out. He had not noticed that she had stopped talking, until she asked him sharply:

"What are you thinking about?"

"This," improvised Peter, holding up the little object. "I'm sure it has a history of its own."

"Give it to me." She held out her hand, and Peter dropped the figurine into it. Her fingers closed upon it, and her lips curved into a faint smile as she raised her beautiful, translucent eyes to Peter's face. He smiled back at her boldly, for the wine he had taken had destroyed his fear of those all-seeing eyes.

"Isn't that a pretty thing? Franz Josef gave it to me—it must have been in 1910, when I made my first appearance in Vienna. I dined with him and Frau Schratt, at their villa. Katti was very nice to me. It was she who asked the Emperor to give me some souvenir of the occasion, and bade me choose——" She broke off, to cry sharply, "Clara!" The maid answered from the shadows at the back of her mistress's chair.

"Have you brought the coffee? Are there liqueurs on the table?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Then I have done with you—you can go. Go, I said! Anywhere you please—out—find a young man to dance with you: isn't it Christmas night?" She gave a soft, malicious chuckle. "I shan't want you until I ring—and that won't be until to-morrow. Out—out—away with you!" Making a sign to Peter for silence, she waited until the door closed, when she drew an impatient sigh of relief. "Now we can talk! Never say too much before servants. Never trust servants. Ay, ay, it's bitter to be dependent on them, as I've become—but don't let's talk about that. What were we saying? Oh! Katti Schratt's little Cupid." She moulded it in her hand. "What do you think she told me after the Emperor had gone? That he'd paid—I forget how many marks for it: the equivalent of more than two hundred English pounds. You can imagine how embarrassed I was! I wanted to give it back, but she insisted. . . . I've always adored crystal: it is so exquisite to touch."

Two hundred English pounds. Peter's fingers gave an involuntary jerk as they closed again upon the tiny object. Two hundred pounds!—as easily dropped in the pocket as a thimble.

"It was not long after that," she murmured, "that I met my English husband, and because I was tired and had had enough of fame, I allowed him to take me away from the theatre: to bring me back to England—to this house." She ended on a sigh. "He

It had never entered his mind that the writer of the letter could be a woman.

was very kind and good. But those are not the years I am glad to remember.

"How egoistical I am!" she broke off to cry: "for hours and hours I have talked of nothing but myself. Now it is your turn. Tell me all that has happened to you since that last meeting of

ours, when you came to see me play in Paris, and told me you were going to be married." She smiled. "I am sure you have been very happy, Richard, and very successful. Happiness and success were written all over you. And did your heart get better?—that silly old heart that you strained playing your ridiculous English games?"

"I can't think what to tell you," said Peter truthfully. "My life 's a dull book by comparison with yours."

"Still the same old taciturn Richard! I never knew a man with less to say for himself, and you haven't changed a bit," she told him triumphantly. A sudden boldness, and her evident lack of suspicion, nerved him to say:

"And in other ways? I must have changed very much since we were last together—Jo!"

She clapped her hands in delight at his confident use of her Christian name.

"At last! In the old days you always insisted upon calling me 'Madame,' which didn't suit me at all. Josefa Sacher—Jo to all but her little English admirer. Josefa Sacher—Meessees Grant!" She grimaced on the words. "That was even worse! Well, well. Come here," she broke off, holding out her hands.

Peter rose; he was a little nervous, now that it came to the point, and cast an apprehensive glance at the candles, now burnt halfway down to their sockets. They gave, all the same, an uncomfortably strong light.

"Bend down," she whispered. Her head was tilted back, her eyes widened until they seemed caverns filled with pale green light, and as she lifted her hands towards his face, the truth came to Peter Garth. She was blind!

"Such little changes," she was murmuring. "I think your nose has grown a little bigger, Richard; you had such a funny, nice, little, childish nose! But I can feel the good, straight bones of your face . . ."

Blind, blind! And within the reach of his fingers an Emperor's gift that was worth more than two hundred English pounds.

"I must show you more of my treasures," she was saying. "I so love my things—not for their value, but for the memories they bring back; you know, at my age, one lives on memories. I wonder, Richard, if you can see a little golden thing made like a snuffbox—and I suppose that 's what it was intended for; but I sometimes put cachous in it. It may not be on the table; I forget if I took it out with the rest of the things. But I often pop it on the mantelpiece, just behind the big Meissen vase, so that I don't have to ask Clara when I want it. She never dusts—the slut!—and anyhow, as I 've told her, it 's only a bit of tinware from the bazaars"—she laughed—"it wouldn't occur to her to steal it."

Peter got up again; his heart was pounding against his ribs.

"The stuff—the stuff I 've had stolen! Every day I miss things. I feel for them and they 're not there. I daren't accuse her: she might kill me before anyone comes."

His heart gave a sickening thud. He muttered something placatory.

"Oh, it happens," she assured him. "A helpless old woman, and blind. What could be easier? Ah, you don't know what I suffer in terror, sometimes—but don't let 's talk about that. To-night I 'm so happy, so safe, with you to look after me!

"Have you found my little box? It 's very heavy—of course, it 's solid gold; and inside the lid there 's a little miniature on ivory, set in diamonds. My husband had it insured for thousands: I suppose I 've got the papers somewhere—goodness knows where. They 're of no use to me."

Peter's hand was behind the Meissen vase, and a series of pictures were flashing through his mind with the speed of an express train. He saw the small handful of change that remained from his previous day's haul; he saw the agents' stairs up which he toiled a dozen times a week. "Nothing to-day. We 'll let you know if anything comes along." He saw the cracked uppers of his one "decent" pair of town shoes, and their deplorable soles; he saw the suits that needed to go to the cleaners, and the limp overcoat which, unless it was pouring, he dared not put on; he saw the look in an agent's eye when he decides that, although you are capable of carrying a part, it will not pay him to introduce such a fusty specimen of humanity to a first-class management; he saw the sordid little teashops where one snatches a cup of tea and a bun, with one's whole aching stomach crying out for a square meal; and he saw the whole army of landladies who take out the price of an unpaid bill in insolence and neglect and inattention to important telephone calls which, if they could only get it into their shallow brains, might bring profit to themselves if duly registered.

"Are you sure you put it on the mantelpiece?" he asked, in a voice he made very level. After a sickening pause—

"Look in my bedroom—through that door; on the table beside my bed," she told him.

Peter felt bad as he switched on the light, and made a perfunctory search for the object which reposed in his pocket.

[*Continued on page 15.*

She held out her hand, and Peter dropped the figurine into it.

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS.

DRAWN BY J. S. GOODALL.

THE PORTER WHO

DRAWN BY

LOVED DOGS.

C. AMBLER.

"BUT NURSE—WE ALWAYS HAVE TWINS!"

DRAWN BY H. H. HARRIS.

"COME AND DINE WITH ME." *(Continued from page 10.)*

"Probably you 've put it somewhere else; this is a big house——"

"It 's four years," she told him, "since I set foot in any but these two rooms. The rest are closed up."

He muttered that it was unwise to put faith in the credulity of a servant.

"She knows the place is full of valuables; I don't suppose she believed your tale about the bazaar for a moment."

She was weeping now, and Peter was cursing himself, and life, and the impulse which had brought him to the house. Once a criminal, always a criminal, he was thinking. Nothing for it now but to get away, as far and as fast as he could.

"That it should happen to-day!" she was sobbing, with the weak despair of old age. "To-day—Christmas—when I was so happy. So happy at the thought of seeing you again, Richard! My one, honest, old English friend!"

This was intolerable. The stab in his conscience goaded him to the final indecency of playing upon the fears of an old and helpless woman.

"I 'll see that the police are informed. But you must take care not to say a word to your servant. It might be dangerous."

"No, no. I will be prudent. Though I don't suppose I shall ever see my poor, beautiful, little snuffbox again. Oh, if you knew how it hurts here!" She pressed a trembling hand to her bosom. "The hatefulness of not being able to trust people! And my dear little snuffbox!"

"Who gave it to you?" he could not forbear asking.

"A man I loved," she answered simply, and began to dry her eyes. "Forgive me. I have no right to spoil our evening by giving way like this. Forgive me, Richard, and fill your glass again.

"I 've seen Christmas out in London, Paris, Ostend, Berlin, Vienna, New York: sometimes by myself, often with friends, sometimes . . . in a lover's arms; and always there 's a kind of sweet sadness in coming to the end of Christmas Day. Like the falling of one more petal from a beautiful rose that blossomed for the first time in one's childhood. . . . There aren't many petals left to fall," she whispered. "Do I detain you?" she asked him, so suddenly that Peter, who had been fidgeting, wondering how to get away, started violently.

"I—I 'm only too willing to be detained," he stammered falsely. "But, very stupidly—and not daring to hope you would put up with my company for so long—I made another appointment."

"My dear Richard, I understand. When one is young—you are still a young man; I keep forgetting—one has appointments all day and all night long, especially at these festivals! It is the privilege—or shall I say the tiresomeness?—of age to give way to sentimentality, and, I fear, to impose it on others. If you must go, will you accept my thanks for a little oasis of honest friendship in a treacherous world?"

The sweat had broken out on Peter's forehead; he sickened, not only at her words, but at the pellucid trustfulness of those beautiful, blind eyes. "I 'm not only a rotten actor," he told himself with unusual humility. "I 'm a rotten crook!" Genuine crookedness would admit of no compunction at such a moment as this; genuine crookedness would not have baulked—even for a moment, as Peter had done—at the grim experience of the previous afternoon, when, at the bidding of an instinct more powerful than himself—the instinct which bids a man not to starve, if money is to be had for the taking—he had marooned decency, and the decent respect death commands from the living.

Yet what good to him are a man's possessions, when he is dead? And what good is a gold snuffbox and a Meissonier miniature to an old blind woman who can do nothing but finger it, and has—obviously—ample provision for her needs?

His voice, as well as his heart, hardened as he rose, and bade her sharply "Good-night." The quick ear of the blind woman caught the change in his tone, and emotion gave way to petulance.

"Well, well, you must keep your appointment—I suppose it is with a woman?—and I must wait here until I am put to bed by a thief! You will let me know about the police, will you not? I suppose they will come here, prying—asking questions. Oh, dear, oh, dear! Wait!" she cried suddenly. "Richard, wait! Why didn't I think of it before?" Her hands were busy among the laces at her bosom. "She 's got the snuffbox," she was panting, "and she 's had the bracelets and the Grand Duchess Vladimir's ring and the little jade chessmen and a hundred things besides! Presently she 'll have the pheasant and the *bonbonnière* and Katti's Cupid and my golden spoons. But there 's one thing she shan't have!" she gasped triumphantly, as she dragged out and held towards him an incredible double rope of pearls. "I wear them night and day, and only Clara knows about them. But at any moment she may tell her wicked accomplices and they 'll come and murder me in the night! Take them, Richard, for God's sake, and look after them for me! And when Clara finds out I haven't got

"Franz Josef gave it to me—it must have been in 1910. . . . I dined with him and Frau Schratt, at their villa."

them any longer, I 'll be safe. I 'll be able to sleep soundly at night ! "

" No, no ! I can't take the responsibility ! " He found himself recoiling with horror from her outstretched hands, from the dripping rope of pearls, dragged downwards by its blazing clasp.

" You must ! Good heavens, Richard, don't *you* care what becomes of me ? "

His teeth were chattering. " Once a criminal, always a criminal." The thought flashed through his mind, how persistently Fate, during the last thirty-six hours, had flung in his way all the elements of crime. " It is written — '*Thou shalt be a thief.*' " There must be some way of disposing of these things. Then, with the money, he 'd make his get - away—away from the theatre for ever, away from England—and then, as there was a heaven above, he 'd go straight for the rest of his life. Who in his senses would invite the continual torture of a guilty conscience unless driven to it by sheer necessity ?

Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he held out his hands, to receive the weight of the pearls, still faintly warm from their wearer's body. How many thousand pounds' worth of temptation had he cupped in his palms ? The room was swinging round him, the burnt-down candles shot up to the ceiling like infernal flowers.

" Thank you, Richard. I knew you were the only person I could trust," he heard her sigh.

No more sordid lodgings, rain squelching in the soles of one's boots, heart in the mouth at the entrance of a dresser who might or might not have seen one's hand in one's room-mate's pocket ! No more fawning on greasy little managers, boasting of parts one had not played, lying to add a few shillings to one's weekly pittance, hanging on to the elbow of someone whose obvious desire is to get rid of one, in the hopes of being " paid off " with a drink ! Ugh ! A spasm wrenched Peter's lips sidelong, as he remembered these and other indignities—disposed of, for ever, by the warm, gleaming globules he held in his palms. " Jo " Sacher's pearls. Josefa Grant's pearls.

Boasting of parts one had not played.

Something cracked in Peter's brain. The candles shrank once more to guttering pools of wax, and the smoke from their dwindling flames went spiralling upwards, like the sad prayers of sinful humanity, recalling the innocence and goodwill of former Christmas Days. Her hands felt very small and weak as he found and clasped them over the pearls.

" No, Jo, dear. I can't do it. They wouldn't be safe with me," he heard himself saying.

" Not safe with you ? " Under her knitted brows, the pale eyes strained upwards with painful incomprehension.

" You must bank them," he told her hurriedly.

" I 've no confidence in banks ! " she cried from the depths of some past, unhappy experience.

" If you 'll give me the name of your bankers," he went on, " I 'll telephone them, after Boxing Day, to send someone to you." Remembering how easy it would be, even so, to deceive her, he added : " You 'd better have someone present—your solicitor, or anyone you can trust, to see them handed over."

" Anyone I can trust ? Haven't I told you—— ? "

" I 'm afraid that 's all I can suggest." He was on his way to the door, trying to forget that the snuffbox was still in his pocket. That, at least, would afford some compensation for his damned, his inconvenient, attack of honesty !

" Good-bye, Richard. Bless you—for a happy evening and for reminding me that the world, after all, doesn't consist wholly of liars and thieves ! "

The room was very quiet. In her high-backed chair, the blind woman wondered if she could find her way back to the bedroom. How long it would be before Clara returned ; how long before the last petal fell from the white-blossomed rose . . .

Suddenly she stiffened. There were footsteps returning across the padded carpet : long, heavy, masculine footsteps — not the shuffling jog-trot of old Clara. On a spasm of terror she cried out : " Who 's there ? "

Something fell into her lap, and the voice of her late companion said : " I found your snuffbox. You—or someone—must have dropped it on the floor."

There was a silence. Then : " Is it *you*, Richard Waldron ? " asked Josefa Grant.

But the only answer was the sound of a closing door.

The distant sound of a band which was playing (somewhat belatedly) " Christians, Awake ! ", brought home to Peter Garth his utter solitude. There on the doorstep, with the dark arch of the sky above him and the darker spaces of the park stretching beyond the limits of his sight, he might have been isolated upon some distant star. Loneliness and fear, fear of the future, of the present, of the past . . .

He forced a jaunty whistle through his teeth and gave a suspiciously cheerful " Good-night " to a passing policeman. The latter grinned at the " toff " in tails, who had evidently, in celebration of Christmas, forgotten his overcoat. Peter grinned back, a little nervously. Since that moment in the Park he had not felt so good about policemen.

" Happy Christmas, officer," he volunteered.

" A bit late, aren't you, Sir ? We 'll have New Year with us in a minute."

New Year ! The pavement rang beneath Peter's homebound feet. New Year : and the same old round of struggle, discouragement, petty shifts, apologies for living. Still, there were always possibilities about a new year. [THE END.]

PERSONS OR THINGS UNKNOWN

by JOHN DICKSON CARR,

Author of "The Burning Court," "Four False Weapons"

Illustrated by KENNETH INNS.

"Mr. Radlow ran to Mr. Vanning. . . . crying 'You are a murderer! You have murdered him!'"

"AFTER all," said our host, "it 's Christmas. Why not let the skeleton out of the bag?"

"Or the cat out of the closet," said the historian, who likes to be precise even about *clichés*. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," said our host. "I want to know whether it 's safe for anyone to sleep in that little room at the head of the stairs."

He had just bought the place. This party was in the nature of a house-warming; and I had already decided privately that the place needed one. It was a long, damp, high-windowed house, hidden behind a hill in Sussex. The drawing-room, where a group of us had gathered round the fire after dinner, was much too long and much too draughty. It had fine panelling—a rich brown where the firelight was always finding new gleams—and a hundred little reflections trembled down its length, as in so many small gloomy mirrors. But it remained draughty.

Of course, we all liked the house. It had the most modern of lighting and heating arrangements, though the plumbing sent ghostly noises and clanks far down into its interior whenever you turned on a tap. But the smell of the past was in it; and you could not get over the idea that somebody was following you about. Now, at the host's flat mention of a certain possibility, we all looked at our wives.

"But you never told us," said the historian's wife, rather shocked, "you never told us you had a ghost here!"

"I don't know that I have," replied our host quite seriously. "All I have is a bundle of evidence about something queer that once happened. It 's all right; I haven't put anyone in that little room at the head of the stairs. So we can drop the discussion, if you 'd rather."

"You know we can't," said the Inspector: who, as a matter of strict fact, is an Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He smoked a large cigar, and contemplated ghosts with satisfaction. "This is exactly the time and place to hear about it. What is it?"

"It 's rather in your line," our host told him slowly. Then he looked at the historian. "And in your line, too. It 's a historical story. I suppose you 'd call it a historical romance."

"I probably should. What is the date?"

"The date is the year sixteen hundred and sixty."

"That 's Charles the Second, isn't it, Will?" demanded the historian's wife; she annoys him sometimes by asking these questions. "I 'm terribly fond of them. I hope it has lots of big names in it. You know: Charles the Second and Buckingham and the rest of them. I remember, when I was a little girl, going to see"—she mentioned a great actor—"play David Garrick. I was looking forward to it. I expected to see the programme and the cast of characters positively bristling with people like Dr. Johnson and Goldsmith and Burke and Gibbon and Reynolds, going in and out every minute. There wasn't a single one of them in it, and I felt swindled before the play had begun."

The trouble was that she spoke without conviction. The historian looked sceptically over his pince-nez.

"I warn you," he said, "if this is something you claim to have found in a drawer, in a crabbed old handwriting and all the rest of it, I 'm going to be all over you professionally. Let me hear one anachronism——"

But he spoke without conviction, too. Our host was so serious that there was a slight, uneasy silence in the group.

"No. I didn't find it in a drawer; the parson gave it to me. And the handwriting isn't particularly crabbed. I can't show it to you, because it 's being typed, but it 's a diary: a great, hefty mass of stuff. Most of it is rather dull, though I 'm steeped in the seventeenth century, and I confess I enjoy it. The diary was begun in the summer of '60—just after the Restoration—and goes on to the end of '64. It was kept by Mr. Everard Poynter, who owned Manfred Manor (that 's six or seven miles from here) when it was a farm.

"I know that fellow," he added, looking thoughtfully at the fire. "I know about him and his sciatica and his views on mutton and politics. I know why he went up to London to dance on Oliver Cromwell's grave, and I can guess who stole the two sacks of malt out of his brew-house while he was away. I see him as half a Hat; the old boy had a beaver hat he wore on his wedding day, and I 'll bet he wore it to his death. It 's out of all this that I got the details about people. The actual facts I got from the report of the coroner's inquest, which the parson lent me."

"Hold on!" said the Inspector, sitting up straight. "Did this fellow Poynter see the ghost and die?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But he was one of the witnesses. He saw a man hacked to death, with thirteen stab-wounds in his body, from a hand that wasn't there and a weapon that didn't exist."

There was a silence.

All the characters and incidents in this story are imaginary.

"'Sir,' said the Squire, 'you abuse my hospitality.'"

" A murder ? " asked the Inspector.

" A murder."

" Where ? "

" In that little room at the head of the stairs. It used to be called the Ladies' Withdrawing Room."

Now, it is all very well to sit in your well-lighted flat in town and say we were hypnotised by an atmosphere. You can hear motor-cars crashing their gears, or curse somebody's wireless. You did not sit in that house, with a great wind rushing up off the downs, and a wall of darkness built up for three miles around you : knowing that at a certain hour you would have to retire to your room and put out the light, completing the wall.

" I regret to say," went on our host, " that there are no great names. These people were no more concerned with the Court of Charles the Second—with one exception—than we are concerned with the Court of George the Sixth. They lived in a little, busy, possibly ignorant world. They were fierce, fire-eating Royalists, most of them, who cut the Stuart arms over their chimney-pieces again and only made a gala trip to town to see the regicides executed in October of '60. Poynter's diary is crowded with them. Among others there is Squire Radlow, who owned this house then and was a great friend of Poynter. There was Squire Radlow's wife, Martha, and his daughter Mary.

" Mistress Mary Radlow was seventeen years old. She was not one of your fainting girls. Poynter—used to giving details—records that she was five feet tall, and thirty-two inches round the bust. 'Pretty and delicate,' Poynter says, with hazel eyes and a small mouth. But she could spin flax against any woman in the county ; she once drained a pint of wine at a draught, for a wager ; and she took eager pleasure in any good spectacle, like a bear-baiting or a hanging. I don't say that flippantly, but as a plain matter of fact. She was also fond of fine clothes, and danced well.

" In the summer of '60 Mistress Mary was engaged to be married to Richard Oakley, of Rawndene. Nobody seems to have known much about Oakley. There are any number of references to him in the diary, but Poynter gives up trying to make him out. Oakley was older than the girl ; of genial disposition, though he wore his hair like a Puritan ; and a great reader of books. He had a good estate at Rawndene, which he managed well, but his candle burned late over his books ; and he wandered abroad in all weathers, summer or frost, in as black a study as the Black Man.

" You might have thought that Mistress Mary would have preferred somebody livelier. But Oakley was good enough company, by all accounts, and he suited her exactly—they tell me that wives understand this.

" And here is where the trouble enters. At the Restoration, Oakley was looking a little white. Not that his loyalty was exactly suspect ; but he had bought his estate under the Commonwealth. If sales made under the Commonwealth were now declared null and void by the new Government, it meant ruin for Oakley ; and also, under the businesslike standards of the time, it meant the end of his prospective marriage to Mistress Mary.

" Then Gerald Vanning appeared.

" Hoy, what a blaze he must have made ! He was fresh and oiled from Versailles, from Cologne, from Bruges, from Brussels, from Breda, from everywhere he had gone in the train of the formerly exiled king. Vanning was one of those 'confident young men' about whom we hear so much complaint from old-style Cavaliers in the early years of the Restoration. His family had been very powerful in Kent before the Civil Wars. Everybody knew he would be well rewarded, as he was.

" If this were a romance, I could now tell you how Mistress Mary fell in love with the handsome young Cavalier, and forgot about Oakley. But the truth seems to be that she never liked Vanning. Vanning disgusted Poynter by a habit of bowing and curvetting, with a superior smile, every time he made a remark. It is probable that Mistress Mary understood him no better than Poynter did.

" There is a description in the diary of a dinner Squire Radlow gave to welcome him here at this house. Vanning came over in a coach, despite the appalling state of the roads, with a dozen lackeys in attendance. This helped to impress the Squire, though nothing had as yet been settled on him by the new régime. Vanning already wore his hair long, whereas the others were just growing theirs. They must have looked odd and patchy, like men beginning to grow beards, and rustic enough to amuse him.

" But Mistress Mary was there. Vanning took one look at her, clapped his hand on the back of a chair, bowed, rolled up his eyes, and began to lay siege to her in the full-dress style of the French king taking a town. He slid *bons mots* on his tongue like sweetmeats ; he hiccoughed ; he strutted ; he directed killing ogles. Squire Radlow and his wife were enraptured. They liked Oakley of Rawndene—but it was possible that Oakley might be penniless in a month. Whereas Vanning was to be heaped with preferments, a matter of which he made no secret. Throughout this dinner Richard Oakley looked unhappy, and 'shifted his eyes.'

" When the men got drunk after dinner, Vanning spoke frankly to Squire Radlow. Oakley had staggered out to get some air under the apple-trees ; what between liquor and crowding misfortunes, he did not feel well. Together among the fumes, Vanning and Squire Radlow shouted friendship at each other, and wept. Vanning swore he would never wed anybody but Mistress Mary, not if his soul rotted deep in hell as Oliver's. The Squire was stern, but not too stern. 'Sir,' said the Squire, 'you abuse my hospitality ; my daughter is pledged to the gentleman who has just left us ; but it may be that we must speak of this presently.' Poynter, though he saw the justice of the argument, went home disturbed.

" Now, Gerald Vanning was not a fool. I have seen his portrait, painted a few years later when periwigs came into fashion. It is a shiny, shrewd, razorish kind of face. He had some genuine

[*Continued on page 47.*

THEIR LAST CHRISTMAS IN THE OLD COUNTRY.

FROM THE LITTLE THEATRE TO—
This episode from "NINE SHARP," the Little Theatre's witty revue, shows Eric Anderson and Charlotte Leigh in a tableau of Ford Madox Brown's well-known painting.

THE LAST OF ENGLAND.

(After Ford Madox Brown's Picture.)

MAN: The day has come at last,
The day for sailing,
For cutting adrift from the past
That was nothing but failing—
Now it is time to try
New hope, new endeavour,
Now it is England good-bye,
Good-bye for ever.

VOICE: All aboard! all aboard

MAN: Good-bye to the fields we have loved, good-bye to the lanes,
Good-bye to the gates, and the roofs, and the sun on the window-panes,
Good-bye to the bricks in the walls, to the smoke that ascends
From the chimney-stacks of the homes of our lifelong friends.

VOICE: All aboard!

MAN: Good-bye to the earth we have crumbled in our hand,
Good-bye to the streets and the cities we know and understand,
To the woods we have wandered through in the fading light,
To the birds that have sung as we lay in our bed at night.

WOMAN: The house stands empty now,
The rooms are bare,
I can hear the boots of the men
On the hollow stair,
And the horse that whinnied high
In the waiting cart—
The blanks where the pictures hung
Are a blank in my heart.

MAN: There is work, they say, beyond, and a world that 's new
For those who have failed at home in the task that they strove to do—
Good-bye to our native land, to our native sky,
To the life that is ended now. England, good-bye.

VOICE: All aboard! all aboard!

THE SONG, "THE LAST OF ENGLAND," SUNG IN "NINE SHARP," IS PRINTED BY COURTESY OF MR. HERBERT FARJEON, THE AUTHOR.

—THE TATE GALLERY. *Here is a reproduction of* "THE LAST OF ENGLAND," *Ford Madox Brown's famous painting of two emigrants leaving England; now in the Tate Gallery.*

PASSIONATE ELOPEMENT.

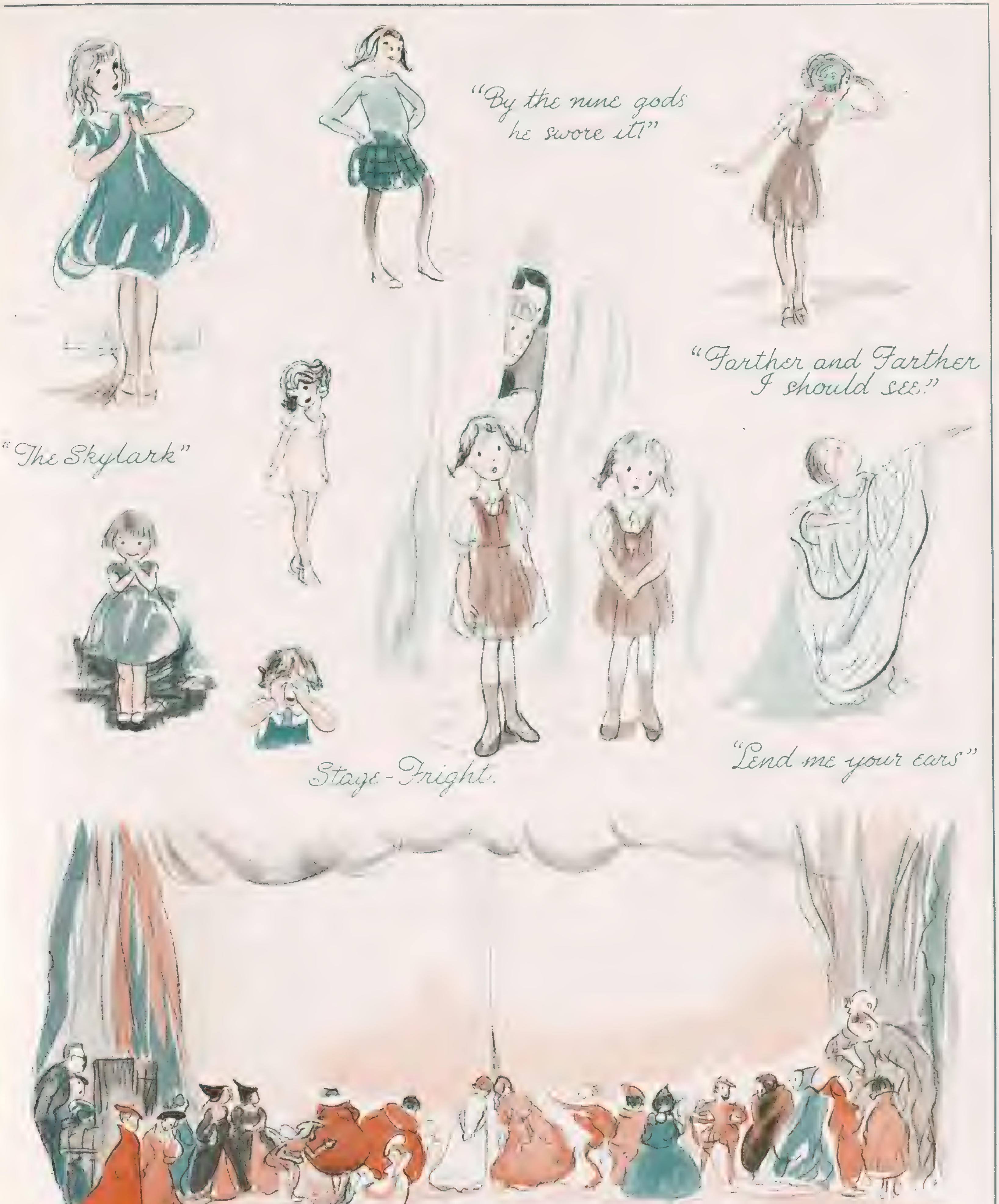
FROM THE DRAWING BY ROWLANDSON.

THE LOVER WHO NEVER LETS HER DOWN.

DRAWN BY COLE.

THE FINALE OF THE CHRISTMAS

FROM THE DRAWINGS



TERM: THE SCHOOL ENTERTAINMENT.

BY MORTON SALE.

"YOU TAKE HIM, LEO; I'M DIETING."

DRAWN BY VICKY.

URGENT DELIVERY
PARCEL POST
MEDIÆVAL LADY: "George, you look just splendid as 'Parcel Post'! All you need now is this nice large white label."
GEORGE: (with fervour) "I do! And at once!"
THE Right LABEL IS "White Label"
Dewar's Famous Scotch

It's a way they have at

CHRISTMAS . . .

to get the party well 'lit up' by giving

GREYS

CIGARETTES

Remember—*you can't go wrong if you give cigarettes,* especially if they're Greys. Ask to see the gay Christmas gift boxes of these famous cigarettes.

Packed ready for Christmas Posting

Greys sales are always mounting—
It's the quality that's counting!

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THE STOLEN MISTLETOE AND THE LOST KISS.

FROM THE PICTURE BY M. L. MONTBARD.

POLLY THE PEERLESS, WHO MARRIED A DUKE — AND "SHE WAS THE VERY FIRST"

The enchanting Lavinia Fenton (1708-1760) was the famous actress who created the rôle of Polly Peachum in "The Beggar's Opera," became the toast of the town, and eventually married the Duke of Bolton.

DRAWINGS BY ERNEST H. SHEPARD.

Mr. Gay, he wrote a play ;
Manager Rich, he ran it.
Miss Lavinia Fenton was engaged
for the leading part.
Never was there success more certain !
Polly Peachum, taking a curtain,
Also took possession of a susceptible
Ducal heart.
And
<u>That</u>
Began
It !

All the stars who attain the Peerage
(Ancient lineage or modern beerage ;
Coronet earned at Agincourt, or
slaking a nation's thirst.)
Do but follow in sweet succession
Duchess Lavinia's gay possession.
Polly the Peeress leads the dance, for
She
Was
The
Very
First !

VERSES BY DOROTHEA MAPLESON.

QUEEN MARY OF ENGLAND

Flora Robson as "Mary Tudor," in the play of that name,
by Ethel Gabain, R.B.A.

JULIET

Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet,
by Ethel Gabain, R.B.A.

ON THE ROAD TO DINGLEY DELL FOR CHRISTMAS: M

' Such was the progress of Mr. Pickwick and his friends by the Muggleton Telegraph, on their way to Dingley Dell; and at three o'clock that afternoon they all stood . . . upon the steps of the Blue Lion . . . Mr. Pickwick was busily engaged in counting the barrels of oysters and superintending the disinterment of the codfish, when he felt

FROM THE PICTURE

R. PICKWICK AND THE MUGGLETON TELEGRAPH AT THE BLUE LION.

himself gently pulled by the skirts of the coat. Looking round, he discovered that the individual who resorted to this mode of catching his attention was no other than Mr. Wardle's favourite page, better known to the readers of this unvarnished history by the distinguishing appellation of the fat boy."

BY FRANK REYNOLDS.

"INFANCY"

"YOUTH"

(Reproduced from the Lancret Pictures in the National Gallery.)

"MANHOOD."

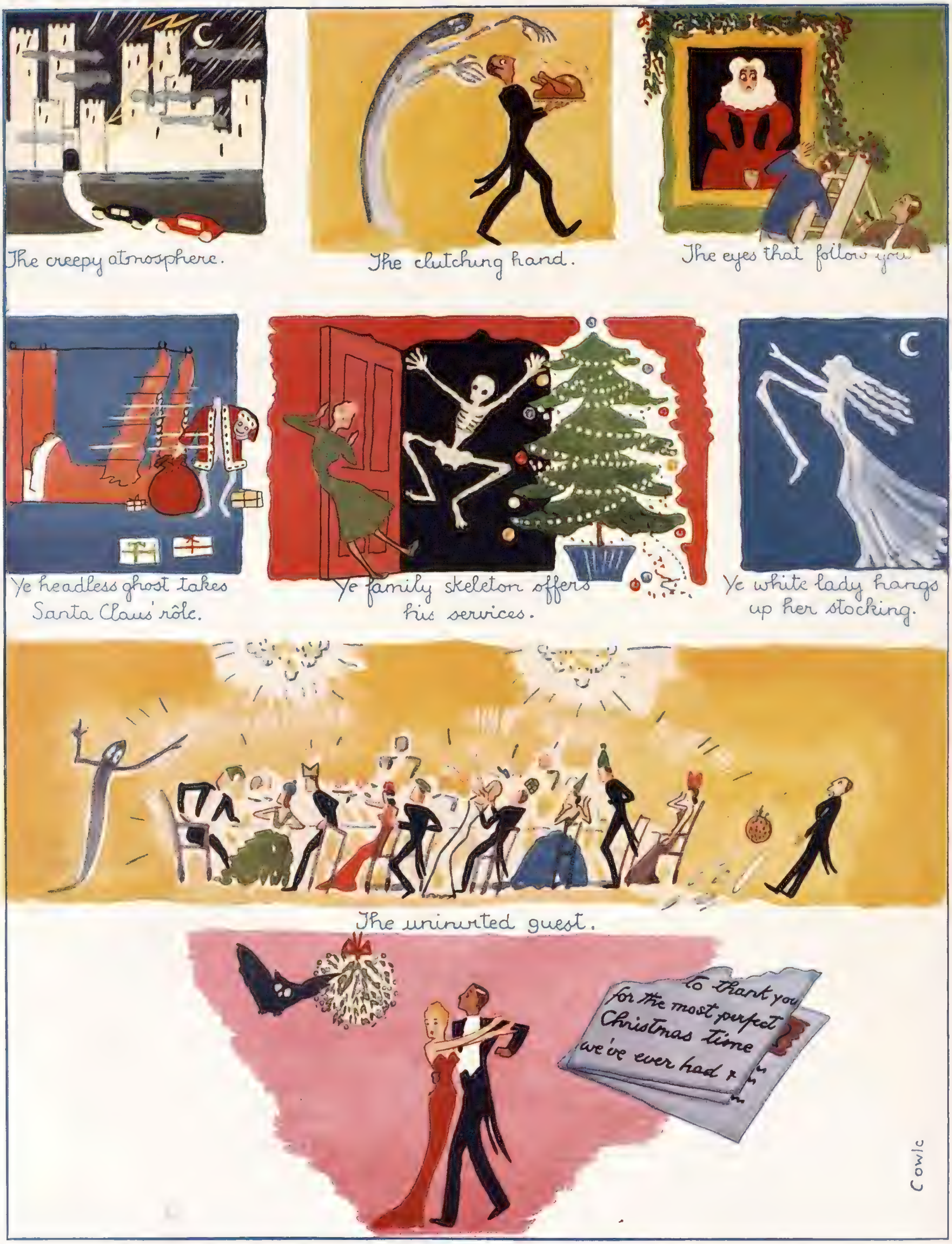
"AGE."

FRUITY FABLES. NO. II.—MAJOR RADISH TROTS OUT A FEW.

DRAWN BY G. E. STUDDY.

FRUITY FABLES. NO. I.—MISS PINEAPPLE ANNOUNCES HER ENGAGEMENT TO MR. CHUNK.

DRAWN BY G. E. STUDDY.



A PERFECT CHRISTMAS AT THE HAUNTED CASTLE.

DRAWN BY JOSEPHINE COWLE.

WILLS'S
GOLD FLAKE
SPECIAL CIGARETTES
in
Presentation Oak Boxes
ENTIRELY FREE FROM ADVERTISEMENT

100's CABINET *(as illustrated)* 7/-
50's CABINET 4/2 150's CABINET 10/-

The MINX for 1939 — a still greater Success!

C.F.H.

THE HILLMAN MOTOR CAR CO. LTD., COVENTRY. *London Showrooms & Export Div.:* ROOTES LTD., DEVONSHIRE HOUSE, PICCADILLY, W.1.

STEPPING ON THE GAS IN THE 'EIGHTIES.

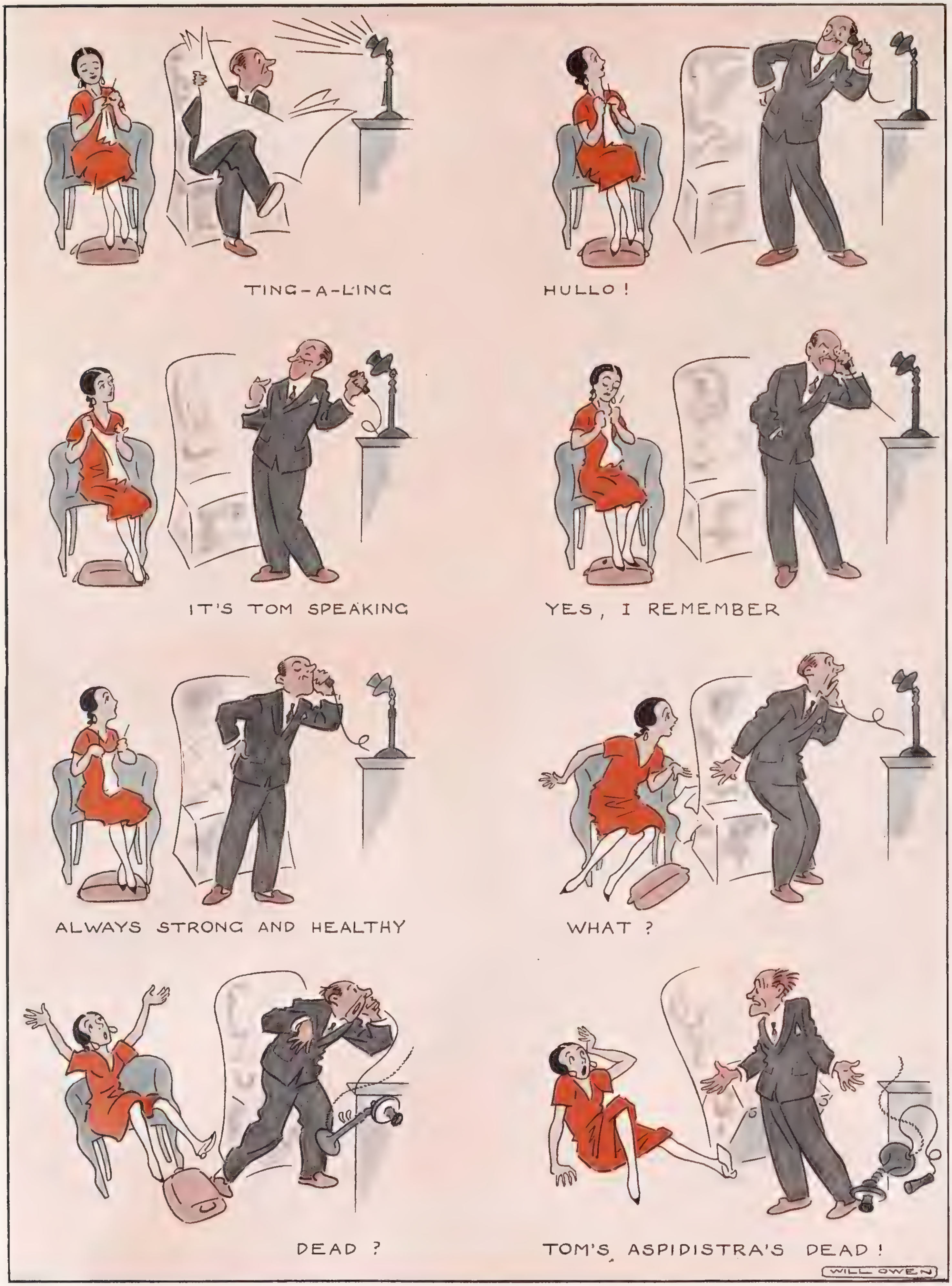
DRAWN BY ERIC PARKER.

NOT THE GHOST OF A CHANCE.

DRAWN BY A. K. MACDONALD

HEAVENLY BODIES.

DRAWN BY ERTE.



NO FLOWERS, BY REQUEST.

DRAWN BY WILL OWEN.

Happy Motherhood

A happy, healthy baby usually means a happy, healthy mother . . .

Be sure of health and happiness for yourself and baby by using Cow & Gate — the finest food in the world when natural feeding fails. Remember, you will always have the satisfaction of knowing that you gave baby the best . . . the food that seven Royal babies have been reared on in the past few years. Your baby's future is far too precious to risk using any cheap substitute for the best. Only the best is good enough for your baby. Buy Cow & Gate today and be sure.

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COW & GATE MILK FOOD

"THE FOOD OF ROYAL BABIES"

By Appointment to H.M. the King of Iraq

Craven "A"
the gift with the real touch of quality
25 for 1/3
50 for 2/6
100 for 5/-
150 for 7/6
200 for 10/-
The Season's Greetings
Xmas
200 Craven "A" 200
PEOPLE do appreciate Craven 'A' quality, for they give more Craven 'A' than any other cork-tipped cigarette in the whole wide world at Christmas time.
Craven 'A' are so fresh, so cool, so luxuriously smooth to the throat that they are always sure of a welcome.
You can buy Craven 'A' in their smart, colourful gift boxes everywhere—six convenient sizes to choose from, each with a card on the back for your personal greetings.
Give throat-smooth smoking this Christmas—give Craven 'A'.
HANDY TO POST
25 for 1/3
40 for 2/-
50 for 2/6
100 for 5/-
150 for 7/6
200 for 10/-
Made specially to prevent sore throats
CARRERAS LTD. — 150 YEAR'S REPUTATION FOR QUALITY

PERSONS OR THINGS UNKNOWN. (Continued from page 18)

classical learning, and a smattering of scientific monkey-tricks, the new toy of the time. But, above all, he had foresight. In the first place, he was genuinely smitten with hazel eyes and other charms. In the second place, Mistress Mary Radlow was a catch. When awarding bounty to the faithful, doubtless the King and Sir Edward Hyde would not forget Vanning of Mallingford; on the other hand, it was just possible that they might.

" During the next three weeks it was almost taken for granted that Vanning should eventually become the Squire's son-in-law. Nothing was said or done, of course. But Vanning dined a dozen times here, drank with the Squire, and gave to the Squire's wife a brooch once owned by Charles the First. Mistress Mary spoke of it furiously to Poynter.

" Then the unexpected news came.

" Oakley was safe in his house and lands. An Act had been passed to confirm all sales and leases of property since the Civil Wars. It meant that Oakley was once more the well-to-do son-in-law; and the Squire could no longer object to his bargain.

" I have here an account of how this news was received at the manor. I did not get it from Poynter's diary. I got it from the records of the coroner's inquest. What astonishes us when we read these chronicles is the blunt directness, the violence, like a wind, or a pistol clapped to the head, with which people set about getting what they wanted. For, just two months afterwards, there was murder done."

II.

Our host paused. The room was full of the reflections of firelight. He glanced at the ceiling; what we heard up there was merely the sound of a servant walking overhead.

" Vanning," he went on, " seems to have taken the fact quietly enough. He was here at the manor when Oakley arrived with the news. It was five or six o'clock in the afternoon. Mistress Mary, the Squire, the Squire's wife, and Vanning were sitting in the Ladies' Withdrawing Room. This was (and is) the room at the head of the stairs—a little square place, with two ' panel ' windows that would not open. It was furnished with chairs of oak and brocade; a needlework-frame; and a sideboard chastely bearing a plate of oranges, a glass jug of water, and some glasses.

" There was only one candle burning, at some distance from Vanning, so that nobody had a good view of his face. He sat in his riding-coat, with his sword across his lap. When Oakley came in with the news, he was observed to put his hand on his sword; but afterwards he ' made a leg ' and left without more words.

" The wedding had originally been set for the end of November; both Oakley and Mistress Mary still claimed this date. It was accepted with all the more cheerfulness by the Squire, since, in the intervening months, Vanning had not yet received any dazzling benefits. True, he had been awarded £500 a year by the Healing and Blessed Parliament. But he was little better off than Oakley; a bargain was a bargain, said the Squire, and Oakley was his own dear son. Nobody seems to know what Vanning did in the interim, except that he settled down quietly at Mallingford.

" But from this time curious rumours began to go about the countryside. They all centred round Richard Oakley. Poynter records some of them, at first evidently not even realising their direction. They were as light as dandelion-clocks blown off, but they floated and settled.

" Who was Oakley? What did anybody know about him, except that he had come here and bought land under Oliver? He had vast learning, and above a hundred books in his house; what need did he have of that? What had he been? A parson? A doctor of letters or physic? Or letters of a more unnatural kind? Why did he go for long walks in the wood, particularly after dusk?

" Oakley, if questioned, said that this was his nature. But an honest man, meaning an ordinary man, could understand no such nature. A wood was thick; you could not tell what might be in it after nightfall; an honest man preferred the tavern. Such whispers were all the more rapid-moving because of the troubled times. The broken bones of a Revolution are not easily healed. Then there was the unnatural state of the weather. In winter there was no cold at all: the roads dusty; a swarm of flies; and the rose-bushes full of leaves into the following January.

" Oakley heard none of the rumours, or pretended to hear none. It was Jamy Achen, a lad of weak mind and therefore afraid of nothing, who saw something following Richard Oakley through Gallows Copse. The boy said he had not got a good look at it, since the time was after dusk. But he heard it rustle behind the trees, peering out at intervals after Mr. Oakley. He said that it seemed human, but that he was not sure it was alive.

" On the night of Friday, the 26th November, Gerald Vanning rode over to this house alone. It was seven o'clock, a late hour for the country. He was admitted to the lower hall by Kitts, the Squire's steward, and he asked for Mr. Oakley. Kitts told

"' But I am sure his friend has followed him,' says Vanning."

him that Mr. Oakley was above-stairs with Mistress Mary, and that the Squire was asleep over supper with Mr. Poynter.

"It is certain that Vanning was wearing no sword. Kitts held the candle high and looked at him narrowly, for he seemed on a wire of apprehension and kept glancing over his shoulder as he pulled off his gloves. He wore jack-boots, a riding-coat half-buttoned, a laced band at the neck, and a flat-crowned beaver hat with a gold band. Under his sharp nose there was a little edge of moustache, and he was sweating.

"'Mr. Oakley has brought a friend with him, I think,' says Vanning.

"'No, Sir,' says Kitts, 'he is alone.'

"'But I am sure his friend has followed him,' says Vanning, again twitching his head round and looking over his shoulder. He also jumped as though something had touched him, and kept turning round and round and looking sharply into corners as though he were playing hide-and-seek.

"'Well!' says Mr. Vanning, with a whistle of breath through his nose. 'Take me to Mistress Mary. Stop! First fetch two or three brisk lads from the kitchen, and you shall go with me.'

"The steward was alarmed, and asked what was the matter. Vanning would not tell him, but instructed him to see that the servants carried cudgels and lights. Four of them went above-stairs. Vanning knocked at the door of the Withdrawing Room, and was bidden to enter. The servants remained outside, and both the lights and the cudgels trembled in their hands: later they did not know why.

"As the door opened and closed, Kitts caught a glimpse of Mistress Mary sitting by the table in the rose-brocade dress she reserved usually for Sundays, and Oakley sitting on the edge of the table beside her. Both looked round as though surprised.

"Presently Kitts heard voices talking, but so low he could not make out what was said. The voices spoke more rapidly; then there was a sound of moving about. The next thing to which Kitts could testify was a noise as though a candlestick had been knocked over. There was a thud; a high-pitched kind of noise; muffled breathing sounds and a sort of thrashing on the floor; and Mistress Mary suddenly beginning to scream over it.

"Kitts and his three followers laid hold of the door, but someone had bolted it. They attacked the door in a way that roused the Squire in the dining-room below, but it held. Inside, after a silence, someone was heard to stumble, and grope towards the door. Squire Radlow and Mr. Poynter came running up the stairs just as the door was unbolted from inside.

"Mistress Mary was standing there, panting, with her eyes wide and staring. She was holding up one edge of her full skirt, where it was stained with blood as though someone had scoured and polished a weapon there. She cried to them to bring lights; and one of the servants held up a lantern in the doorway.

"Vanning was half-lying, half-crouching over against the far wall, with a face like oiled paper as he lifted round his head to look at them. But they were looking at Oakley, or what was left of Oakley. He had fallen near the table, with the candle smashed beside him. They could not tell how many wounds there were in Oakley's neck and body; above a dozen, Poynter thought, and he was right. Vanning stumbled over and tried to lift him up, but, of course, it was too late. Now listen to Poynter's own words:

"'Mr. Radlow ran to Mr. Vanning and laid hold of him, crying, "You are a murderer! You have murdered him!" Mr. Vanning cried to him, "By God and His mercy, I have not touched him! I have no sword or dagger by me!" And indeed this was true. For he was flung down on the floor by this bloody work, and ordered to be searched, but not so much as a pin was there in his clothes.

"'I had observed by the nature of the wide, gaping wounds that some such blade as a broad knife had inflicted them, or the like. But what had done this was a puzzle, for every inch of the room did we search, high, low and turnover; and still not so much as a pin in crack or crevice.

"'Mr. Vanning deposed that as he was speaking with Mr. Oakley, something struck out the light, and overthrew Mr. Oakley, and knelt on his chest. But who or what this was, or where it had gone when the light was brought, he could not say.'"

III.

Bending close to the firelight, our host finished reading the notes from the sheet of paper in his hands. He folded up the paper, put it back in his pocket, and looked at us.

The historian's wife, who had drawn closer to her husband, shifted uneasily. "I wish you wouldn't tell us these things," she complained. "But tell us, anyway. I still don't understand. What was the man killed with, then?"

"That," said our host, lighting his pipe, "is the question. If you accept natural laws as governing this world, there wasn't anything that could have killed him. Look here a moment!"

(For we were all looking at the ceiling.)

"The Squire begged Mistress Mary to tell him what had happened. First she began to whimper a little, and for the first time in her life she fainted. The Squire wanted to throw some water over her, but Vanning carried her downstairs and they forced brandy between her teeth. When she recovered she was a trifle wandering, with no story at all.

"Something had put out the light. There had been a sound like a fall and a scuffling. Then the noise of moving about, and the smell of blood in a close, confined room. Something seemed to be plucking or pulling at her skirts. She does not appear to have remembered anything more.

"Of course, Vanning was put under restraint, and a magistrate sent for. They gathered in this room, which was a good deal bleaker and barer than it is to-day; but they pinned Vanning in the chimney corner of that fireplace. The Squire drew his sword and attempted to run Vanning through: while both of them wept, as the fashion was. But Poynter ordered two of the lads to hold the Squire back, quoting himself later as saying, 'This must be done in good order.'

"Now, what I want to impress on you is that these people were not fools. They had possibly a cruder turn of thought and speech; but they were used to dealing with realities like wool and beef and leather. Here was a reality. Oakley's wounds were six inches deep and an inch wide, from a thick, flat blade that in places had scraped the bone. But there wasn't any such blade, and they knew it.

"Four men stood in the door and held lights while they searched for that knife (if there was such a thing); and they didn't find it. They pulled the room to pieces; and they didn't find it. Nobody could have whisked it out, past the men in the door. The windows didn't open, being set into the wall like panels, so nobody could have got rid of a knife there. There was only one door, outside which the servants had been standing. Something had cut a man to pieces; yet it simply wasn't there.

"Vanning, pale but calmer, repeated his account. Questioned as to why he had come to the house that night, he answered that there had been a matter to settle with Oakley. Asked what it was, he said he had not liked the conditions in his own home for the past month: he would beg Mr. Oakley to mend them. He had done Mr. Oakley no harm, beyond trying to take a bride from him, and therefore he would ask Mr. Oakley to call off his dogs. What dogs? Vanning explained that he did not precisely mean dogs. He meant something that had got into his bedroom cupboard, but was only there at night; and he had reasons for thinking Mr. Oakley had whistled it there. It had been there only since he had been paying attentions to Mistress Mary.

"These men were only human. Poynter ordered the steward to go up and search the little room again—and the steward wouldn't go.

"That little seed of terror had begun to grow like a mango-tree under a cloth, and push up the cloth and stir out tentacles. It was easy to forget the broad, smiling face of Richard Oakley, and to remember the curious 'shifting' of his eyes. When you recalled that, after all, Oakley was twice Mistress Mary's age, you might begin to wonder just whom you had been entertaining at bread and meat.

"Even Squire Radlow did not care to go upstairs again in his own house. Vanning, sweating and squirming in the chimney corner, plucked up courage as a confident young man and volunteered to go. They let him. But no sooner had he got into the little room than the door clapped again, and he came out running. It was touch-and-go whether they would desert the house in a body."

Again our host paused. In the silence it was the Inspector who spoke, examining his cigar and speaking with some scepticism. He had a common-sense voice, which restored reasonable values.

"Look here," he said. "Are you telling us local bogy-tales, or are you seriously putting this forward as evidence?"

"As evidence given at a coroner's inquest."

"Reliable evidence?"

"I believe so."

"I don't," returned the Inspector, drawing the air through a hollow tooth. "After all, I suppose we've got to admit that a

man was murdered, since there was an inquest. But if he died of being hacked or slashed with thirteen wounds, some instrument made those wounds. What happened to that weapon? You say it wasn't in the room; but how do we know that? How do we know it wasn't hidden away somewhere, and they simply couldn't find it?"

"I think I can give you my word," said our host slowly, "that no weapon was hidden there."

"Then what the devil happened to it? A knife at least six inches in the blade, and an inch broad——"

"Yes. But the fact is, nobody could see it."

"It wasn't hidden anywhere, and yet nobody could see it?"

"That 's right."

"An invisible weapon?"

"Yes," answered our host, with a curious shining in his eyes. "A quite literally invisible weapon."

"How do you know?" demanded his wife abruptly.

Hitherto she had taken no part in the conversation. But she had been studying him in an odd way, sitting on a hassock; and, as he hesitated, she rose at him in a glory of accusation.

"You villain!" she cried. "Ooh, you unutterable villain! You 've been making it all up! Just to make everybody afraid to go to bed, and because *I* didn't know anything about the place, you 've been telling us a pack of lies——"

But he stopped her.

"No. If I had been making it up, I should have told you it was a story." Again he hesitated, almost biting his nails. "I 'll admit that I may have been trying to mystify you a bit. That 's reasonable, because I honestly don't know the truth myself. I can make a guess at it, that 's all. I can make a guess at how those wounds came there. But that isn't the real problem. That isn't what bothers me, don't you see?"

Here the historian intervened. "A wide acquaintance with sensational fiction," he said, "gives me the line on which you 're working. I submit that the victim was stabbed with an icicle, as in several tales I could mention. Afterwards the ice melted—and was, in consequence, an invisible weapon."

"No," said our host.

"I mean," he went on, "that it 's not feasible. You would hardly find an icicle in such unnaturally warm weather as they were having. And icicles are brittle: you wouldn't get a flat, broad icicle of such steel-strength and sharpness that thirteen stabs could be made and the bone scraped in some of them. And an icicle isn't invisible. Under the circumstances, this knife was invisible—despite its size."

"Bosh!" said the historian's wife. "There isn't any such thing."

"There is if you come to think about it. Of course, it 's only an idea of mine, and it may be all wrong. Also, as I say, it 's not the real problem, though it 's so closely associated with the real problem that——"

"But you haven't heard the rest of the story. Shall I conclude it?"

"By all means."

"I am afraid there are no great alarms or sensations," our host went on, "though the very name of Richard Oakley became a nightmare to keep people indoors at night. 'Oakley's friend' became a local synonym for anything that might get you if you didn't look sharp. One or two people saw him walking in the woods afterwards; his head was on one side and the stab-wounds were still there.

"A grand jury of Sussex gentlemen, headed by Sir Benedict Skene, completely exonerated Gerald Vanning. The coroner's jury had already said 'persons or things unknown,' and added words of sympathy with Mistress Mary to the effect that she was luckily quit of a dangerous bargain. It may not surprise you to hear that eighteen months after Oakley's death she married Vanning.

"She was completely docile, though her old vivacity had gone. In those days young ladies did not remain spinsters through choice. She smiled, nodded, and made the proper responses, though it seems probable that she never got over what had happened.

"Matters became settled, even humdrum. Vanning waxed prosperous and respectable. His subsequent career I have had to look up in other sources, since Poynter's diary breaks off at the end of '64. But a grateful Government made him Sir Gerald Vanning, Bart. He became a leading member of the Royal Society, tinkering with the toys of science. His cheeks filled out, the slyness left his

"When she recovered, she was a trifle wandering, with no story at all."

eyes, a periwig adorned his head, and four Flanders mares drew his coach to Gresham House. At home he often chose this house to live in when Squire Radlow died; he moved between here and Mallingford with the soberest grace. The little room, once such a cause of terror, he seldom visited; but its door was not locked.

"His wife saw to it that these flagstones were kept scrubbed, and every stick of wood shining. She was a good wife. He for his part was a good husband: he treated her well and drank only for his thirst, though she often pressed him to drink more than he did. It is at this pitch of domesticity that we get the record of another coroner's inquest.

"Vanning's throat was cut on the night of the 5th October, '67.

"On an evening of high winds, he and his wife came here from Mallingford. He was in unusually good spirits, having just done a profitable piece of business. They had supper together, and Vanning drank a great deal. His wife kept him company at it. (Didn't I tell you she once drank off a pint of wine at a draught, for a wager?) She said it would make him sleep soundly; for it seems to be true that he sometimes talked in his sleep. At eight o'clock, she tells us, she went up to bed, leaving him still at the table. At what time he went upstairs we do not know, and neither do the servants. Kitts, the steward, thought he heard him stumbling up that staircase out there at a very late hour. Kitts also thought he heard someone crying out, but a high October gale was blowing and he could not be sure.

"On the morning of the 6th October, a cowherd named Coates was coming round the side of this house in a sodden daybreak from which the storm had just cleared. He was on his way to the west meadow, and stopped to drink at a rain-water barrel under the eaves just below the little room at the head of the stairs. As he was about to drink, he noticed a curious colour in the water. Looking up to find out how it had come there, he saw Sir Gerald Vanning's face looking down at him under the shadow of the yellow trees. Sir Gerald's head was sticking out of the window, and did not move; neither did the eyes. Some of the glass in the window was still intact, though his head had been run through it, and——"

It was at this point that the Inspector uttered an exclamation.

It was an exclamation of enlightenment. Our host looked at him with a certain grimness, and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You know the truth now, don't you?"

"The truth?" repeated the historian's wife, almost screaming with perplexity. "The truth about what?"

"About the murder of Oakley," said our host. "About the trick Vanning used to murder Oakley seven years before.

"I'm fairly sure he did it," our host went on, nodding reflectively. "Nothing delighted the people of that time so much as tricks and gadgets of that very sort. A clock that ran by rolling bullets down an inclined plane; a diving-bell; a burglar-alarm; the Royal Society played with all of them. And Vanning (study his portrait one day) profited by the monkey-tricks he learned in exile. He invented an invisible knife."

"But see here——!" protested the historian.

"Of course he planned the whole thing against Oakley. Oakley was no more a necromancer or a consorter with devils than I am. All those rumours about him were started with a definite purpose by Vanning himself. A crop of whispers, a weak-minded lad to be bribed, the whole power of suggestion set going; and Vanning was ready for business.

"On the given night he rode over to this house, alone, with a certain kind of knife in his pocket. He made a great show of pretending he was chased by imaginary monsters, and he alarmed the steward. With the servants for witnesses, he went upstairs to see Oakley and Mistress Mary. He bolted the door. He spoke pleasantly to them. When he had managed to distract the girl's attention, he knocked out the light, tripped up Oakley, and set upon him with that certain kind of knife. There had to be many wounds and much blood, so he could later account for blood on himself. The girl was too terrified in the dark to move. He had only to clean his knife on a soft but stiff-brocaded gown, and then put down the knife in full view. Nobody noticed it."

The historian blinked. "Admirable!" he said. "Nobody noticed it, eh? Can you tell me the sort of blade that can be placed in full view without anybody noticing it?"

"Yes," said our host. "A blade made of ordinary plain glass, placed in the large glass jug full of water standing on a sideboard table."

There was a silence.

"I told you about that glass water-jug. It was a familiar fixture. Nobody examines a transparent jug of water. Vanning could have made a glass knife with the crudest of cutting tools; and glass is murderous stuff—strong, flat, sharp-edged, and as sharp-pointed as you want to make it. There was only candle-light, remember. Any minute traces of blood that might be left on the glass knife would sink as sediment in the water, while everybody looked straight at the weapon in the water and never noticed it. But Vanning (you also remember?) prevented Squire Radlow from throwing water on the girl when she fainted. Instead, he carried her downstairs. Afterwards he told an admirable series of horror-tales; he found an excuse to go back to the room again alone, slip the knife into his sleeve, and get rid of it in the confusion."

"At eight o'clock, she tells us, she went up to bed, leaving him still at the table."

The Inspector frowned thoughtfully. "But the real problem——" he said.

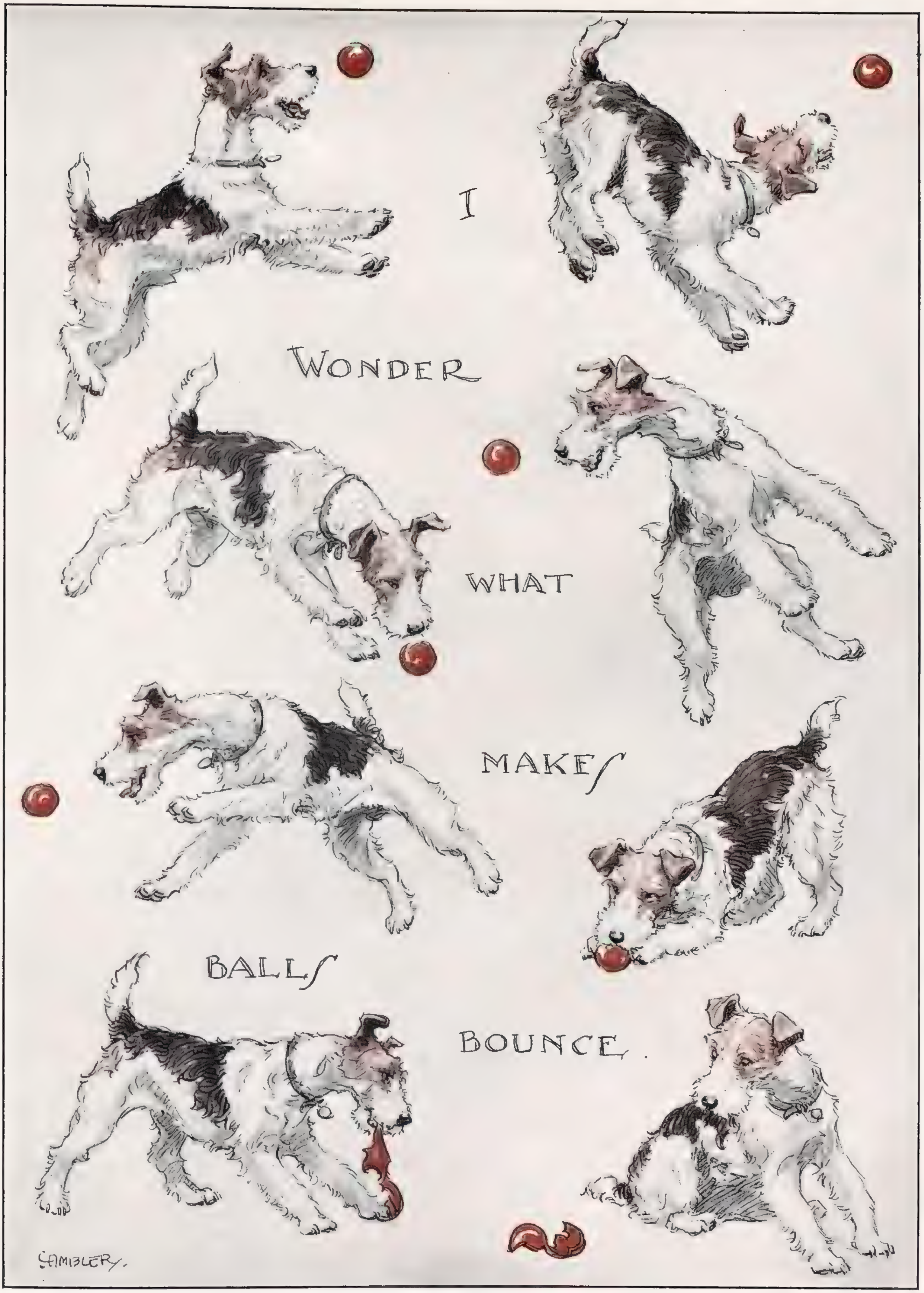
"Yes. If that was the way it was done, did the wife know? Vanning talked in his sleep, remember."

We looked at each other. The historian's wife, after a glance round, asked the question that was in our minds.

"And what was the verdict of *that* inquest?"

"Oh, that was simple," said our host. "Death by misadventure, from falling through a window while drunk and cutting his throat on the glass. Somebody observed that there were marks of heels on the board floor as though he might have been dragged there; but this wasn't insisted on. Mistress Mary lived on in complete happiness, and died at the ripe age of eighty-six, full of benevolence and sleep. These are natural explanations. Everything is natural. There's nothing wrong with that little room at the head of the stairs. It's been turned into a bedroom now; I assure you it's comfortable; and anyone who cares to sleep there is free to do so. But at the same time——"

"Quite," we said. [THE END.]



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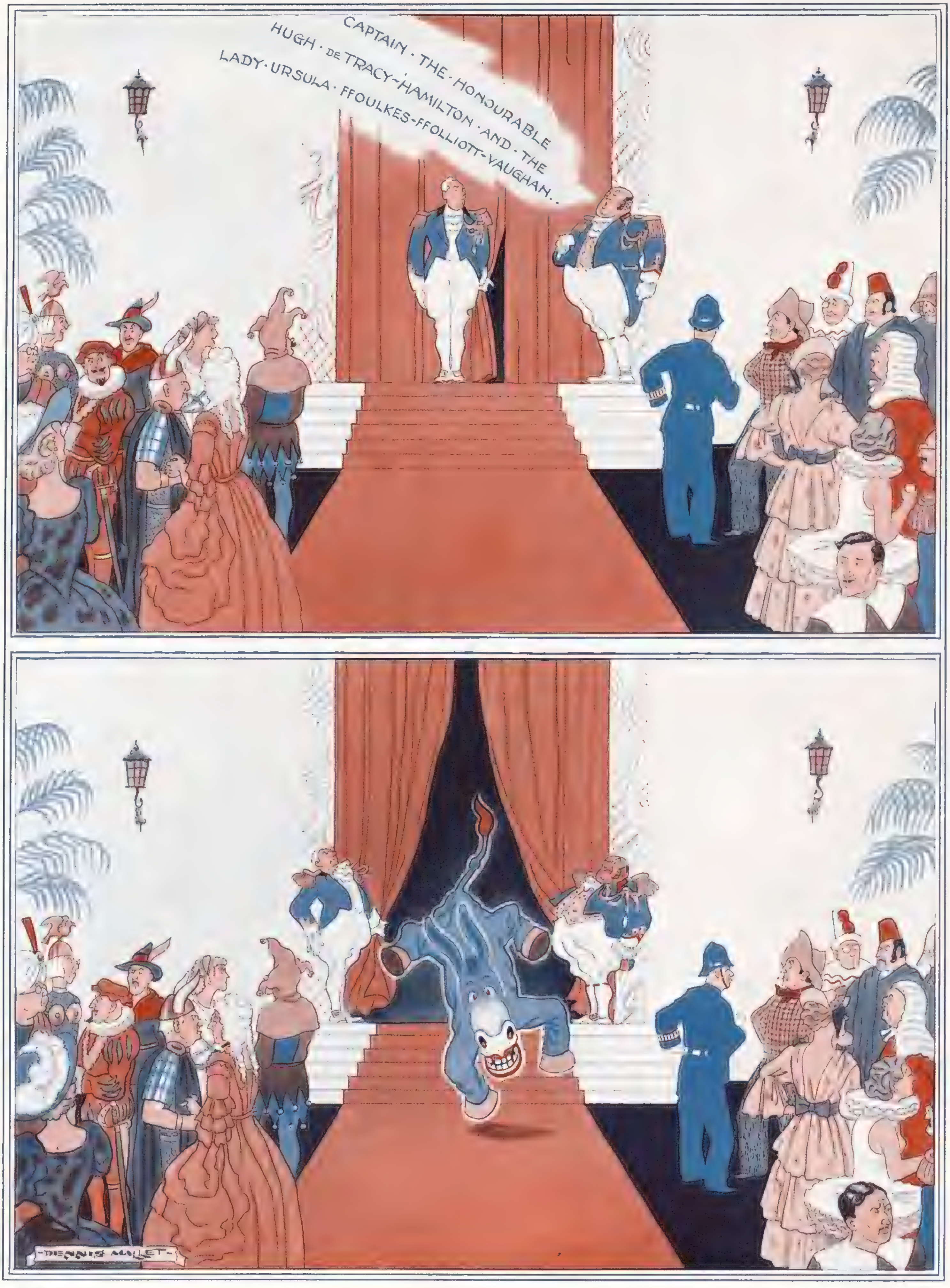

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"What's the matter with us, Robert?"

THE OX AND THE ASS.

By KATE O'BRIEN,

Author of "Without My Cloak," "Pray for the Wanderer," etc.

Illustrated by

JACK M. FAULKS.

ROBERT and Teresa Harwood were irritable at breakfast. There was no apparent reason for this. The coffee was strong, the toast was hot; moreover, it was Christmas Eve, and the post was genial and amusing. But the two to whom it was addressed were not amused.

"Frightful card the Maitlands have—as usual!" said Teresa.

"I was just thinking it was rather clever," said Robert.

"Oh, yes, I agree it's *clever*. That's what's so frightful. Lucky it came to-day, anyhow, as I think I forgot to send them one."

"Forgot *the Maitlands*?"

"Yes, your lovely Maitlands."

"Upon my word, Teresa! Who else did you forget?"

"Precious few, I imagine. Alone and unaided I addressed two hundred Christmas cards last night, to my husband's friends."

"*Our* friends."

"If you think that the mixed lot of legal bores, theatrical bores, and pansy connoisseur bores that you cultivate are what I call my friends——"

"Oh, stop it. Anyhow, I expect dear David did some of the stamp-licking for you!"

"David had a cocktail here last evening: was having it when you rang up and announced that you weren't coming home. We were both expecting you at that minute. He was sorry not to see you, and he left five minutes after you rang off."

"Well, I wasn't sorry not to see him."

"Naturally—when you had a chance to dine with the illustrious Flavia Rose! I nearly asked him to stay to dinner—I'd have been glad of his company—but I had too much to do last night. Christmas is a busy time in most houses, Robert—though you don't seem to notice that."

"Neither does David, apparently. *I* didn't ask him to come in for a cocktail yesterday."

"Nor did I. He just looked in to leave his presents for the children."

"Oh!"

"Oh, what?"

"Oh—nothing."

"This is a new regulation! A man I knew before I ever set eyes on you may not have a cocktail in my house without your advance permission?"

"Did I say so? And, anyhow, your knowing him before you met me is not a very good argument."

"I'm not in need of arguments. You're raising a smoke-screen, as usual, Robert, to hide your guilt."

"Guilt? My dear girl, do you think it was any pleasure for me to hang round the Savoy last night, when I should have been finishing my 'Ceramics' article for *The Collector*?"

"Theatrical ladies are a perennial pleasure to you, Robert, dear."

"Well, of course, if you don't *want* me to do the lyrics for Abrahams' new revue,—"

"You know I do! Besides, how could I stop you?"

"You're doing your best to."

"I'm not. But writing lyrics for Abrahams is one thing, and making a fool of yourself over his leading lady is quite another!"

"Making a fool of myself?"

"Oh, I heard you humming round your dressing-room when you came in at one o'clock this morning! That self-satisfied hum! Poor Robert—I don't need to see your face when I hear it! You'll be writing bad sonnets to her to-day, I expect!"

"If you knew the day's work I have in front of me, Teresa——"

"I do know—and I wish you hadn't. You've too many irons in the fire, Robert."

"Not I. I know as well as you do that I'm not a genius, but I'm a chap who can do a good many things pretty well—and I like variety of interest."

"Of course. But there are only twenty-four hours to the day, and somehow——"

"Besides, we want every penny I can earn."

"You do. I don't. I could live any old way. I did before I married you."

"Ah, that chaotic studio, and your smock all covered with paint!"

"You used to like that smock."

"I shall always like it, Tess."

All the characters and incidents in this story are imaginary.

They smiled uncertainly at each other, but some memory hurt her even as she smiled, and she spoke coldly again.

" That 's all very fine, but it 's ten years now since I had a palette or a brush in my hand ! "

" That 's *not* my fault. I 've always begged you to go on with your painting ! And how often have I wanted to have the stables down there made into a studio ? "

" Sheer waste of money ! How on earth could anyone paint with a house to run, a lot of fussy intellectuals to entertain, and three children to deal with ? "

" Did you or did you not want those three children ? "

" Of course I wanted my children ! And so did you—but having them hasn't prevented you from being a leading junior at the Bar, an art expert, a biographer, a writer of light verse, and an all-round social success ! "

" Is it my fault if I had the luck to be born a male ? Anyhow, you and I can't solve the feminist problem, my dear girl."

He shook *The Times* open as he spoke, and Teresa returned to examination of the post. But she eyed him unhappily meanwhile. He looked tired, she thought, behind his handsome façade of masculinity. Tired and uncertain. He worked very hard, using his many gifts ungrudgingly to uphold the standard he had set for their married life and for their children's future. Personal ambition urged him, too, of course—and justifiably. He deserved success and all the pleasure it gave and increasingly would give him. And though freedom had been sweet to her in her youth, and though often now she looked back with a longing almost bitter to that old painter's gamble for fame which would almost certainly not have come off, but had, nevertheless, mattered exceedingly—she also took pleasure in his success. Not merely for him, she admitted, but because she liked the setting it gave her, her clothes and amusements, this charming stucco house in its leafy *cul-de-sac* off Highgate Hill. Above all, the happy, lovely faces of three well-cherished children. Yes, she admitted now as she studied Robert's frowning face with mixed exasperation and gentleness, yes, there are advantages in being tied to his chariot-wheels. And I married him for love, after all, and that love has not failed us seriously yet. And true enough, he and I can't solve the feminist problem.

She sighed. What was wrong lately, then, that made goodwill so dumb and irritability so nimble ? What were they slipping into ? What did she care about Flavia Rose, or the brief vanities into which his harmless ambitions led him ? With all his industry and professional correctness he could have been so dull by now were it not for these saving talents that kept him a little frivolous. Ah, human and endearing ! Nevertheless, there was that idiotic humming last night. Too much champagne, no doubt. Too many successful compliments exchanged with Miss Flavia Rose.

Teresa's chin went up again.

" Have you nothing pleasant to say, Robert ? "

" You seem to think I haven't, my dear. And it was you who began the snappiness this morning. Can't even leave the Maitlands alone ! "

Touché, Teresa admitted. That opening peevishness had made it impossible for him to apologise about last night, she knew.

" What 's the matter with us, Robert ? "

" *Is* there anything the matter ? "

" Oh, please !—you know very well that for the last six months——"

" Teresa—I should be on my way to the Temple now. Sir William wants the Nicolson will case prepared so that he can work on it while he 's in Hampshire next week, and if you knew what that means ! And there are a couple of other briefs I must at last begin to study. And I 'll have to finish off the ' Ceramics ' down there. It *must* reach the editor before five. My God ! "

His look of mingled worry and evasiveness worked on her feeling of anxiety for them both and irrationally made her angry.

" Editors, ceramics, the Nicolson will ! Everything matters except you and me, and the wreck we 're making of our marriage ! "

" Please don't be theatrical ! "

" Well, I live with a man of the theatre ! "

" In a way I wish you did. But I 'm only a barrister, my dear ! "

" Well, be a barrister, then, and keep barristers' hours ! "

" I don't intend to. I have other talents," he said, a trifle smugly.

" So *you* say."

" And so I 'll prove. And while I 'm doing so I also intend to be one of the youngest K.C.'s in legal history, my dear, and perhaps the youngest Judge ! "

" Well, anyway, I promise you you 'll be the *only* Judge ever to have written revue lyrics for Flavia Rose ! "

Robert Harwood was as complicated a character in his English way as was Teresa, whose blood was Hebridean and Spanish. But both were warm-hearted people, and their good will towards each other had kept marriage quick and vivid for them through the variations of ten years. But he was aware that their increasing reliance on it was creating dangers for them nowadays, and, true as was his heart towards his wife and children, he knew his own vanity, his desire to shine personally in the various worlds where he marketed his talents. He knew his weakness for the glamour of " theatrical ladies." And he was feeling guilty about last night, which had, in fact, turned out to be an entirely unbusinesslike evening of pleasure, an elegant flirtation with Flavia Rose, Abrahams and his dull wife being mere make-weights. Robert had shone and enjoyed himself, when he could well have been at home writing his article and helping with the Christmas cards. He had intended, therefore, to be very sweet and subtly reassuring at breakfast. But Teresa, quicker than he, had chosen their weapons, and though in fact he always admired the honesty and good sense of her rages, this routing of his planned technique flummoxed him now. Crashing on to his nervous guilt and his awareness of an overcrowded day ahead, it made him obstinate and sulky—what Teresa most unfairly called " smug."

" Probably," he assented to this last taunt with an air of conceit. " At any rate, I 'll be an amusing subject for biographers, my dear ! "

" Not to say a ' spicy ' one ! " she retorted.

" That, too, perhaps." He stood up and stretched himself, tall and swaggering, in front of the fire. " A man with a nagging wife is excused a lot, you know."

She stared at him.

" You—you mean what you 're saying ? "

" My dear Teresa, I always mean what I say. I 'm an English barrister. *I* wasn't brought up on the Isle of Skye, and *my* mother didn't come from Cadiz."

" You 're trying to tell me that you 're—unfaithful ? "

He had gone too far. But who does not in a quarrel ? He looked at his watch and began to fuss. Let her make what she liked of the idiotic situation. If she must always fight with swords instead of kisses——

" I 'm trying to get to my chambers. Tragedy at 9.15 a.m. ! "

" Tragedy any time, Robert, if what you said is true."

" Oh, God ! " he said, feeling helpless before his own moody confusion, and he strode to the door, opening it to find his eight-year-old daughter, Anna, on the threshold.

This child of their first great love was immeasurably dear to her parents and was accustomed to receive from them the utmost consideration and gentleness. But both had already greeted her this morning in the nursery, and at this moment were full of distraction and selfish, adult pain.

" Oh, Daddy—I 'm glad I caught you before you 're gone——"

" Well, you didn't—I 'm gone."

" No, you 're not. Please, Daddy——"

" What is it ? Tell it to Mummy. I must fly."

He was pulling on his coat, stuffing papers into his despatch-case. Through the open door Teresa, angry and *distraite*, let her eyes rest inattentively on her husband and daughter.

" I *have* told Mummy—but she has to go to the bank, she says, and won't be home again then until it 's too late—she 's given all her money to Cook, she says—for the milkman and things——"

Robert had scattered the sheets of his " Ceramics " article over the floor and was plunging after them in a fury.

" Damnation ! " he swore as he dived about. " Money ? Nonsense, Anna ! You were given tons of money for your Christmas shopping——"

" Not tons, Daddy. And things are very dear this Christmas. Nanny thinks so, too. As a matter of fact, your present and Mummy's cost a terrible lot——"

" Well, if you 've bought the presents——"

" Oh, but this isn't for presents ! It 's—oh, you know, Daddy, the special thing, the secret that happens in the nursery this evening—it 's not quite ready. There are stars and things—I only want about two-and-six——"

" I haven't got two-and-six—Mummy robbed my pockets this morning for Cook and the milkman."

He snapped the locks of his despatch-case.

" Then how will you get to the Temple ? "

" Season ticket, silly ! Borrow two-and-six from Nanny. Good-bye."

He was gone, slamming the door. Anna stared along the hall.

" Of all the rudeness ! " she said.

Teresa had not paid much attention to their dialogue. Her eyes and heart were engaged with the fluster and agitation of her husband's departure, and her brain was miserably full of injury and surmise. As the door slammed tears sprang to her eyes, and, terrified of weeping before Anna, she jerked up her head, gulped some coffee, and fought for self-control.

Anna came into the room.

" Really, Mummy ! What 's the matter with him ? "

Teresa could not trust herself to answer, and stood up to escape.

" Surely, somehow, I can get two-and-six—for the secret ? "

" Yes, darling. Get it from Nanny."

They were at the foot of the staircase now.

" But Nanny 's short herself, she says. She hasn't done all her own shopping yet, and the hot-water bottle she sent her sister was four-and-eleven——"

" Oh, Anna, please ! "

Teresa dashed upstairs, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

Anna was both offended and amazed. She went up to the nursery muttering indignantly.

She was, her parents thought, a particularly interesting child. Not merely attractive to the eye, as a child of theirs should be, but something of an eccentric, and in her tastes very intelligent and thoroughgoing. And almost the most marked of her tastes was for family life and traditions. She was an establisher of traditions; had been so from the cradle. She controlled Nanny and her young brothers, Tom and Bill, by means of idealistic rules and rituals for the Harwood family life. Finding her parents perfect and the life which they gave and directed also by derivation perfect, her tendency was to formalise, even crystallise, the entirely satisfactory. So, for good morning and for bedtime, for Sundays and Saturdays, for birthdays and Easters and for when people were sick, there had grown up a light, sweet edifice of custom, made sacred by the eight devoted years of Anna's life. It was her funny, wholehearted, gracious response to love, and it rested on her belief that her father and mother were the most perfect beings on earth. They did not wholly understand or see this emotional structure, but they always played their daughter's games with tender care, and their love for her made them able to seem perfect in her eyes without having to strain for effect.

Christmas was naturally for such a child an orgy of traditions. And one of these, her most elaborate invention, fed another of her especial tastes, a taste which Robert observed with keen amusement—her mania for theatre. She had a very beautiful toy theatre in the nursery in which, aided by Tom and Nanny, and even lately by three-year-old Bill, she gave sweet, shaky puppet-shows for the entertainment of her parents and Cook and Lena. But every Christmas Eve—this would be the fourth successive time—she gave her show of shows. The toy stage was set as the stable in Bethlehem, the toy gramophone played Christmas music, and Anna, Nanny, Bill and Tom manœuvred the puppet figures—angels, shepherds, kings—of the Nativity. But with this imaginative difference, to Robert's delight, that programmes given to the audience made it clear that each character—except the Infant in the crib—was played by some living person familiar to Anna. For instance, the King of Persia — played by Daddy; the King of Turkey—played by Lord Baldwin; the King of Turkey's serving-man—played by Donald Duck; a silly sheep—played by old Miss Hicks; a cow — played by my music teacher. And so on. This meant that the producer had to attempt to reproduce characteristics of her chosen " actors " in the features or behaviour of the puppets they played, and it was amusing to observe how often she succeeded in doing this. A gift for satire and an opportunity to pay off scores were utilised shamelessly, as a rule, in the assigning of the lesser characters. Anna worked very hard and secretly for some weeks in preparation of her Nativity Play. No direct allusion to it was ever allowed in advance. It was called " the secret," and could only be discussed openly by Anna, Nanny, Tom and Bill in committee. But everyone in the house knew that, hail, rain, or snow, they had to be in the nursery at six o'clock on Christmas Eve, to see what they would see.

" What is it ? Tell it to Mummy. I must fly."

This year the usual hints and scuffles had been going on about " the secret," and once Robert and Teresa, laughing about it together, had wondered what Anna would do about casting them this time. Traditionally they could only be given the most heroic parts. Teresa had been Our Lady, an angel, and an archangel; Robert was accustomed to see himself as Saint Joseph, or a Wise King or a chief shepherd.

" There 's nothing else that we can be with honour," Teresa said. " I think I 'll make it easy for her by telling her to leave us out this time."

" You 'll do nothing of the sort," said Robert. " I 've no objection to playing Saint Joseph again if necessary. But really, all this picturesque Popery ! "

" Well, what of it ? My mother came from Cadiz, and Nanny comes from Kilkenny."

Now, however, Anna went upstairs to her last day of preparations in anger and in thought. She could manage the expenses somehow. There must be some new silver paper, that was certain, and some more stuff for snow. And the little trees were very battered. Nanny could probably spare one-and-sixpence, at least. But for Daddy to have been so queer and rude with her—so fussy ! On Christmas Eve—the very day of " the secret." And then Mummy—quite " obliverous." Worse than Daddy, in

a way. And after all the trouble she had taken to cast them properly! For Mummy she had introduced Saint Anne this year—Our Lady's mother. Quite wrongly, Nanny said, but no matter. And Daddy had actually been given Paul Robeson's usual part—the King of Morocco. Well, indeed!

By the time Anna reached the nursery she felt more troubled, uncertain and outraged than ever before in her life. But she was a fighter, like her mother, and, like her Daddy, perhaps something of a wit.

. . . just before leaving, hesitated again by the telephone.

Robert had indeed a busy day. And throughout it his clerk found him unusually fussy and indecisive. He worked like a demon all the morning at the Nicolson will brief for Sir William, but at eleven o'clock he asked sharply for the Highgate number on the telephone. Lena answered. The mistress had gone out at ten o'clock and had said she could not get home before five. He slammed down the receiver and went on working. At twelve-thirty he asked the clerk to get him Mr. Abrahams' number, but just as it was being dialled, told him to leave it. At twelve-forty-five he asked him to dial a Mayfair number, and again dismissed the call before it came through. At one o'clock he sent for a sandwich and drank a glass of sherry. Until three o'clock he wrote steadily, then handed his clerk a manuscript which was to be sent by express messenger to the offices of *The Collector*. Then, after hesitating over the telephone once more, he wrote some business letters, paid a few bills, gave the clerk a handsome Christmas tip, had another glass of sherry, and plunged into examination of a new brief. At a quarter to five he looked at the clock and exlaimed, "Good God! And I simply have to be home in time!" He jumped to his feet, snatched his hat, coat and despatch-case, wished the clerk a Happy Christmas, and, just before leaving, hesitated again by the telephone, shrugged, and hurried away from his chambers.

The clerk smiled musingly. He liked Mr. Harwood, who was generous and considerate. He wondered what was on his mind to-day. In the clerk's opinion, he worked too hard. "Getting the jumps, that's what he is." The telephone rang. A lady of the name of Miss Flavia Rose speaking. A very pleasant-spoken lady. No, Mr. Harwood had just left, Madam. Could he take a message. No, really. She had expected Mr. Harwood to call her to-day. No, nothing important, thank you. The clerk looked somewhat grave as he replaced the receiver. A minute later there was another call. Mrs. Harwood this time. Always an exceptionally pleasant-spoken lady, in the clerk's opinion. He had a high regard for Mrs. Harwood. Mr. Harwood had just this minute left, Madam. Anything particular, Madam? No, only to remind him to be home early to-night. Well, in the clerk's opinion, Mr. Harwood was on his way home now. His last words were, "I simply have to be home in time!" Oh, good. Thank you, Wilson. I hope you and your family will have a very happy Christmas. Thank you, Madam, and the same to you indeed, and to Mr. Harwood and the children.

Teresa was relieved as she came out of the call-box at Harrods. Whatever Robert's tantrums, he evidently wasn't forgetting the pious ceremony of "the secret." She had meant to ring him earlier to remind him of it, but at the same time had shrunk from conversation with him. Mercifully, her day had been so busy that there had been no time to brood, but she knew that she was profoundly unhappy and alarmed for herself and for him. Alarmed at his having called her, with what she saw to be some truth, "nagging wife." Unhappy that, for the first time in their ten years, he had flung the insult of infidelity at her—actual or probable. And had left her alone with the wound, to make what she chose of it. She blamed him bitterly and unsparingly for this, as she hurried about the crowded, festive shops. But blamed herself, too, for much of what had led to it. A nagging wife! Oh, worse—a conceited, cocksure, and unseeing wife. So safe in the warmth of his generous admiration, and therefore so mocking and amused before the touching vanity which led him to cross swords with other women. Let them smile at him had always been her motto; let them just try it on! And when they did, how sure of herself she was as she rode into battle! How pettily she fought, always knocking his weapons of contrition and uncertainty out of his hands with her great spear of mockery! Her certainty that she must always win, and that if there were marital grievances, they

[*Continued on page* XI.

Tessa was relieved as she came out of the call-box.

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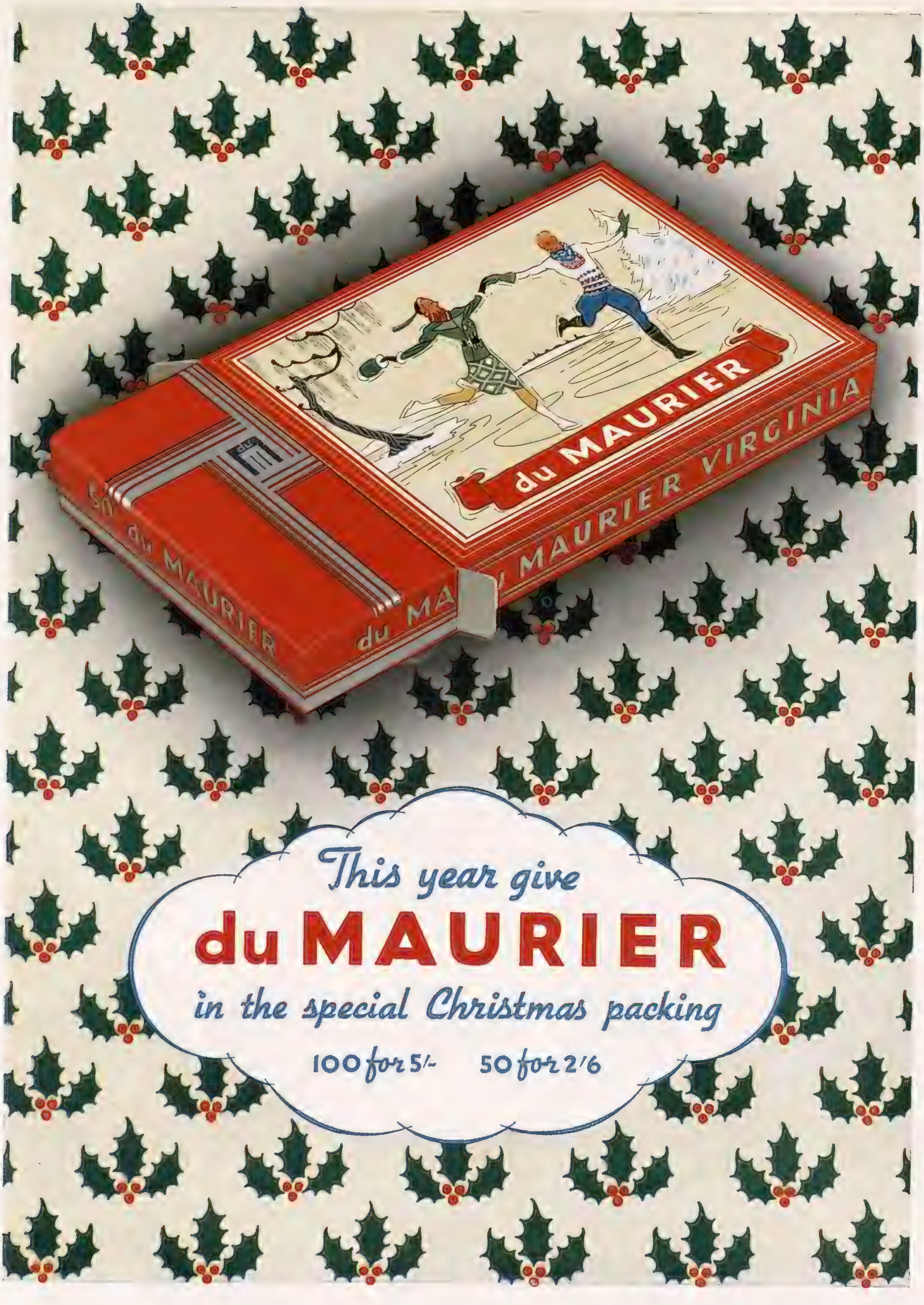
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THE OX AND THE ASS (*Continued from page* 58.)

were hers, the woman's, who had given up so much! How much had he not given up when, for love of her, he had decided to stick to the Bar, and use all his more glamorous talents only on the side? Who was she to be so sure she was worth even a man's occasional regrets? By what divine right did she claim to hold him enchanted for ever against all comers? And this Flavia Rose business, which had been creeping towards them like a menace now, since Robert's first meeting with her in the summer—what was there so unnatural in that threat, if a man had a "nagging wife"? Oh, Robert, Robert—give me one more chance! Just you dare to refuse me one more chance!

She had a very busy day. She was reasonably methodical and she and Robert together had bought the children's presents a week ago. She had also disposed in good time of her shopping for all her own and Robert's relations. (The only Christmas shopping that her husband could be relied upon to do alone was his presents for her, and this year she wondered, with a pang, if Flavia Rose had so confused him that he had forgotten even that.) But Christmas Eve always found her with a thousand small things to do. Sweets to send to So-and-so's little boy; ornaments for the Fortnum's and Finnegan's and Woolworth's, looking for crescent moons and icicles and cocks and hens. The search had made him fearfully late—but it had alleviated pain and shame. He had had to call at the Leicester Galleries, too, for a Matisse drawing which was one of his presents to Teresa, and at Grosvenor Street for the other—a dressing-gown of night-blue silk which he had designed himself for her, and for the just making of which he had had to steal an old, favourite cherry-coloured dressing-gown that the children loved, because it fitted her "like a skin." He had bought Christmas roses, too, and a white shell full of chocolates, so his taxi was laden—but his heart was heavy. He hated to seem to bring offerings—being so gross an offender. But he loved to give things, and this was Christmas, anyhow, so what was a fellow to do?

The two taxis arrived in procession outside the little hooded gate in the wall in the *cul-de-sac* off Highgate Hill. Six o'clock was striking, from a church tower in the darkness. Each fare flung money desperately at the driver, and they rushed through the gate and up the flagged path together, greeting each other nervously, not knowing what to say.

The two taxis arrived in procession outside the little hooded gate.

Christmas-tree; book-tokens for the suddenly-by-God's-mercy-remembered; something else for Cook, whose brother had unluckily sent her fur gloves. To whom on earth could those fur gloves, destined for Cook, be sent? Oh, and poor Anna with her "secret," which they had insulted so cavalierly this morning! Again and again during the day Teresa's heart turned over in pain for that. Two-and-six—for "stars and things." Yes, stars, my darling, and snow, and little trees and little lambs. All new for "the secret." And home with them in a taxi, to be sure of being in time, making such amends as were possible. Oh, Anna, please forgive us! I'll get you the loveliest stars in Harrods, Anna, sweet.

It simply wasn't possible to be home at five, but, anyhow, at twenty to six Teresa, laden and anxious, leapt into a taxi in Knightsbridge—hang the appalling expense!—and implored the taxi-man to drive like mad to Highgate.

At a quarter to six in Bond Street Robert did the same thing, and made the same request, more violently, to his taxi-man. He also was laden, and anxious. And terrified of being late for "the secret." For whatever was happening to Teresa and him, whatever dreadful hankering might have grown in him lately for the suave, almost impersonal and certainly unmocking, unironic sweetness of Miss Flavia Rose, such exactions as Anna's "secret" stood like rocks, and he clung to them. The child was simply *not* to be failed, and he had failed her outrageously this morning. Two-and-six for "stars and things." God, how he had plunged about

Teresa, as usual, plunged first.

"Are we in time? I was sure *you'd* be home—Wilson said you were—so I wasn't so worried."

"I had to go to the shops. The crowds are the very devil!"

"I know. Oh, heavens, let's hurry! Anna will go mad!"

They were in the hall, flinging their parcels down. Each picked out one or two small packages and turned to hurry upstairs.

"What have you there?" Teresa asked Robert.

"Oh, a few stars and things for Anna—I was so rude to her this morning—but I expect it's too late now——"

Teresa paused and looked at him gently.

"I've got some stars and things, too—I was worse than you. But we're both too late——"

They hesitated and half-smiled, then hurried on again with their parcels.

Anna was waiting for them, excited but very grave, by the nursery door. She took their hands.

"Come," she said. "You're almost late."

"Yes, darling, we're terribly sorry," said Teresa. "But Daddy's brought you some new stars and things. So have I. *They're* certainly too late, I'm afraid. Aren't they?"

Anna gave them each a swift, sweet look.

"No, no," she said. "Oh, thank you! If you don't mind waiting a minute, I'd—I'd like to use some of them. Thank you, Daddy. Thank you, Mummy."

" We don't mind waiting. There 's no hurry, pet."

She led them into the nursery, which was lighted only by the fire. Half of the room was screened off, and in the centre of the screening the long stage stood waiting on a table, its drop-scene down. Cook, Lena, and Benny, who did jobs in the garden, were already in their places in the second row of stalls. The two wicker armchairs, which were the front row, were labelled " Reserved." Robert and Teresa took their places in these, and Anna disappeared behind the screens. Nanny, Tom and Bill were invisible—at their posts among the puppet-strings back-stage. The programmes had not yet been distributed.

Teresa took off her hat and powdered her face. Robert turned in his chair and made some jokes with the occupants of the second row of stalls. From the sounds behind the screens it was clear that Anna was introducing some of the new " props " into her set. After some minutes she appeared again, seeming a little uncertain. She came and leant against her mother, and looked very anxiously into Teresa's face.

" Well, darling ? Nothing gone wrong back-stage, is there ? "

" No, Mummy. The stars and things are lovely. But——"

" Well ? "

" Well—I 've—I 've played a joke this time. It—it isn't really a very nice joke. I—I think perhaps we 'd better not have the play at all."

" But, sweetheart—we must! How could your joke not be a nice one, darling ? We 'd simply love it if there 's a joke! Wouldn't we, Daddy ? "

" Oh, yes, Anna—please ! Let 's have the joke. We can't have Christmas without ' the secret ' ! "

" Oh, well, I don't know. All right, then. But you see—you two were dreadful this morning——"

She went off back-stage, looking uncomfortable still, Teresa thought with anguish.

" The programmes, pet ! " she called after her.

" Oh, yes, the programmes."

Anna handed them out, surprisingly without ceremony or flourish, and vanished at once. Before they could open them, the toy gramophone was playing " O du Selige," and the curtain was up.

"I wonder if we are playing the lead this year ? " Robert whispered.

The set was prettier and more innocent than ever, Robert thought. The little stable was set far up-stage left, and on an angle, so that travellers on the empty road which crossed the boards diagonally could pass by from east or west. The sky behind was paling as for dawn, and there was only one tiny star in it, and far down near the field his little crescent moon. There were daisies on the roadside, although icicles hung from the stable roof. The Infant was asleep and curled up naturally, not blessing everybody as convention ordained. St. Joseph had his back to the audience when the curtain rose, and Our Lady was bending to fix the Infant's pillow. There was no one else on the stage yet.

" I wonder if we are playing lead this year ? " Robert whispered.

But when Saint Joseph turned and moved down to the cradle, and Our Lady straightened up to whisper to him, there was a gasp from the audience. For the Saint, young, upright and beardless, wore very arty side-whiskers and had a monocle in his eye. And Our Lady was seen to be very chubby and pink-cheeked, and had a rather large bunch of flowers in her corsage.

" My God—the Maitlands ! " said Teresa, and there was an appreciative giggle from the second row of the stalls.

Robert peered at his programme by the light from the stage.

" You 're right," he whispered to Teresa.

An old woman came bobbing in along the road from the west, entered the stable, kissed Our Lady, and sat down by the Baby's cradle. She had grey curls, wore an apron, and carried a spoon in her hand. Saint Anne, played by Cook. The shepherds came from up-stage over the hill, the chief of them, an important character, with a nose and moustache very like Mr. Neville Chamberlain's. Archangels swung down ahead of them from the flys, to the strains (by Anna, Nanny, Tom and Bill) of " Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The gramophone kept on with " O du Selige." The leading archangel was unmistakably Greta Garbo. There was some confusion as the shepherds came to adore, and also some farcical relief between a sheep that suggested Lena and a funny shepherd with a pipe and biceps like Popeye the Sailor. When the group reached the stable Saint Anne patted the Infant awake, and He sat up and bowed to the chief shepherd.

Then the great star moved in from the east, and took its place above the stable among Garbo and her dangling companions. The gramophone stopped, and one by one the kings moved in along the road from the east. The King of Morocco first, unmistakably played by Paul Robeson, for he sang " Ole Man River " as he advanced. The King of Persia, in a bowler-hat and carrying a small bag labelled " Dr. Hancock." The King of Turkey, very stout, with horny-rimmed glasses and a Panama hat. Played by the Aga Khan, Robert guessed.

There was silence on the stage now while the kings laid down their presents and prostrated themselves. Then the gramophone began to play " The Lambeth Walk." " The comic interlude," said Robert to Teresa.

Sure enough it was. An ox and an ass came bouncing in from the west. He danced on his string in a terrible fuss ; she held up her arms and shook her head like a frenzied scold. They jigged about and tossed their heads and ran at each other and dashed apart, and were in every way exceedingly silly, in time to " The Lambeth Walk." And the ox wore a little barrister's wig, and the ass had a flower on her head, and wore a cherry-coloured silk dress that fitted her like a skin.

Robert and Teresa did not look at each other. Each peeped very timidly at the programme. " The Ox — played by Daddy. The Ass—played by Mummy."

Anna's joke. Anna's revenge and judgment.

The domestic pantomime of the ox and the ass amused the shepherds and the kings, and finally the Holy Family observed it, too, and even the Infant sat up and clapped. So the two quarrellers turned about and saw the stable, the star and the kings, shepherds and angels, and they stopped fighting, took hands and came near to adore. And all the company about the stable knelt again with them, and the toy gramophone played " Adeste Fideles."

When the curtain came down on " the secret " Teresa was unable to control her tears. " The Ox and the Ass " she kept whispering to herself. But Robert saw Anna peeping anxiously through the screens, and he went to her and picked her up and hugged her.

" It was the best ' secret ' ever, my darling," he said.

" Mummy 's crying—I can see. Oh, I didn't mean—— ! "

Teresa came to her and put her arms round Robert, her wet face against her daughter's.

" Yes, you did, and God bless you ! Oh, Anna ! It was lovely ! "

The telephone had been ringing downstairs during " Adeste Fideles." Lena came to Robert now.

" Mr. Abrahams to speak to you, Sir."

" Tell him I can't speak."

" He says it 's important, Sir. He was expecting your decision to-day. He and Mrs. Abrahams and Miss Rose are flying to Paris in the morning, and they 'd like to know before they go if you 'll do the lyrics, Sir."

" Tell them I won't, Lena. Tell them I 'm a barrister, and a busy one. Tell them anything you like ! "

" Very good, Sir."

Anna stroked their two faces.

" You weren't hurt ? You didn't mind ? " Robert kissed her.

" We were hurt, and we did mind ? The best job of work you 've ever done, Anna."

" Oh, you good baby !—you dear satirist ! "

They went through the screens then to congratulate Tom and Bill and Nanny. [THE END.]

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THE DINNER-PARTY.

By PHYLLIS HAMBLEDON.

"YOU can't come to my dinner-party ?" cried Tommy Sittingford over the telephone. "You can't come ? But, good Lord, man, you're putting my numbers all wrong!"

"I know," said Douglas Thorne. "It can't be helped, I'm afraid. Going abroad unexpectedly. Good-bye!"

"But——!" spluttered Tommy.

There was a click at the other end of the wire. The fellow had rung off. Dammit, thought Tommy, furiously, I always knew he was an outsider! Only asked him because everybody does. What do we know of him ? Never clapped eyes on him until he put up at the Red Lion for the hunting! And this just shows. No social conscience whatever! A darn good thing he is going abroad!

Darn good thing in more than one way, thought Tommy, his usual pleasant Pickwickian face pink with rage. He's been going about a sight too much with Celia Vant. Out hunting—the cocktail bar of the Country Club—that ball in aid of something-or-other, when nobody else had had a look-in with her. People had talked. Nigel Vant should have put his foot down. Husbands didn't these days. A pity!

But, at the thought of the Vants, Tommy's face brightened. They had a nephew staying—a boy. But he'd fill up the gap at the party, Tommy's fiftieth birthday, this great occasion on which his staff had spent so many frenzied hours of thought and activity. He'd ring up Celia. No, he'd run across and see her. Then, if the nephew wasn't available, he'd have to fall back on one of the boys who were cramming at the Vicarage. Beardless cubs—that's what Thorne had done to him!

However, when he was in his car, driving down lanes he had known since childhood, he found the thought of Celia soothing. He would ask for her advice. She was grand in emergency, if a little flyaway for ordinary, everyday life in the country. Then, as he neared the Vants' place, he swerved. A car had just come out of the gates. Celia herself was at the wheel.

She didn't recognise him. He was merely a troublesome obstruction. She hooted violently, and missed his mudguard by a couple of inches. Before Tommy had recovered from the shock, she was gone. Now, why was she in such a hell of a hurry ? She was wearing a hat, too. Peculiar. Usually her hair blew all over the place in a way that he could not approve of. A towny hat. Heavens! She wasn't going away, was she ? She hadn't forgotten his dinner-party ? *Heavens!*

Tommy was pallid as he turned in at the drive; pallid as he tugged at the bell. It was a time before his summons was answered. A sulky-looking manservant came at last. Mr. Vant was out, he said, shooting with young Mr. Vant. Further questioning elicited the fact that they were expected shortly. Tommy hesitated, but he had got to find out about Celia somehow. He said that he would come in and wait.

The man showed him into the library—a pleasant, untidy room much used by the family. There were books and magazines all over the place. There were also masses of flowers, arranged in startling colour-schemes. Tommy liked his flowers nice and tidy, but, of course, it wasn't his business. Then his gaze was fixed and caught fast. He stared, petrified, at the mantelpiece. A large white envelope was propped against the clock. "Nigel" was written across it in Celia's own hand. And the ink was barely dry.

Why was Celia writing to Nigel ? wondered Tommy frantically. Why did wives write to husbands, and then depart hell for leather ? Yes, and Thorne, that blighter, was going abroad. *Going abroad.* Even Tommy could recognise the situation. Thorne and Celia! Only the other day, in somebody's smoke-room, such an occurrence had been predicted. "*You mark my words—Celia will be making a bolt with him!*"

She'd done it to-day—the day of his dinner-party! Probably forgotten about it entirely! Well, if that didn't put the tin hat on it, what did ? Now numbers would certainly not be even, for Nigel would not be present, and there would be gloomy whispering, an atmosphere of constraint over everybody! It was too bad of Celia—altogether too bad! It just showed what a pernicious influence the man had on her. Come to think of it, it was hard

[*Continued overleaf.*

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Continued.]

on Nigel, too. He might be older than she was, but he was a thundering good sort. He 'd come back from the coverts with his gun, and——

It mustn't happen—it could not be allowed to happen! Somehow it had got to be stopped. Why, he 'd ordered that lobster *mousse* just because Celia liked it so much. She couldn't be allowed to ruin his party. Besides, Thorne wasn't the man for her. They would be catching the 5.13, the last train to London in the day. He must get hold of her before then!

He hastened to the door; then he remembered the letter. No point in Nigel getting that! So, without the least compunction, he put it into his pocket. The Red Lion was five miles away, and Celia had about ten minutes' start of him. That meant he must drive faster than he had ever driven before!

He tore out of the house. Already a plan was formulating itself. Twenty minutes later he reached the hotel where Thorne was staying. And there, sure enough, in the courtyard stood Celia's own little car!

Tommy dashed through the swing-doors. There was only one thing to do, and he was going to do it. There, by the greatest of good luck, stood Celia in the hall. She was looking prettier than usual, and very excited. She still wore the hat, but she was alone, though no doubt Thorne was just round the corner. She saw Tommy, and looked surprised.

"Hullo! What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Nigel has had an accident!" gasped Tommy.

"*An accident?*" She turned very white. Tommy took advantage of the situation. He grasped her firmly by the arm. Before she could say any more he had piloted her through the swing-doors, with a glance behind for Thorne, who might be expected to appear at any moment. At first Celia was too dazed to say anything, but the fresh air appeared to revive her. When he tried to push her into his car she resisted.

"What sort of accident? Out shooting? Quick, Tommy! Tell me quickly!"

"It may turn out better than we expect," said Tommy. "But there is need of haste!"

There certainly was. Thorne wasn't the kind of man to let you get away with this sort of thing too easily. Tommy gave Celia another push, got into the car himself, and started it. She continued to babble, but he didn't listen. It was market day, and there were enough cattle and sheep festooned about the place to keep him busy. He left the town by devious ways, lest the pursuer should be at his heels. At last Celia could stand it no longer.

"Tommy, I 'll wrench the wheel and drive into the side of the road unless you answer my questions! What has happened to Nigel?"

They were in the country now. Tommy slowed down.

"Perhaps I ought to explain," he said, "that Nigel has very nearly had an accident."

"*Nearly?* What are you talking about? You either have an accident or you don't!"

"Well," began Tommy slowly—it was five minutes past five already—"well, you see, it was like this. Nigel's accident—well, it was nearly losing you. That 's what I was talking about. That farewell letter on the mantelpiece—here it is, by the way—and Thorne telephoning that he was going abroad. Well, even I can put two and two together! But you 're not doing it, Celia! You 're not doing it! Not to-night, at any rate!"

"You mean to say," gasped Celia, "that Nigel is all right?"

"Right as rain!" said Tommy.

"Then take me back to the Red Lion immediately!"

"Certainly not!" said Tommy. "I 'm driving you home." He accelerated, so that there should be no doubt about it. "That fellow Thorne isn't even a gentleman! I happen to take a personal interest in both you and Nigel. Marriage. It 's an institution. You can't get over it. I 've never tried it myself, but I 've the greatest respect for it. I 'm taking you home now, Celia. What you do to-morrow is not my affair."

"To-morrow may be too late!" said Celia.

"I hope so!" said Tommy.

Celia stared at him, and then she began to laugh. She laughed as if she would never stop. Hysterical, that 's what she was, thought Tommy. But he 'd got her safe! He 'd got her! That train would just be going. His party would not be spoilt, especially if he could get hold of the nephew. Not the moment to suggest that, perhaps. He would have to be very tactful.

"I suppose you know you are the biggest fool that ever walked the earth!" gasped Celia at last. [*Continued on page xx.*

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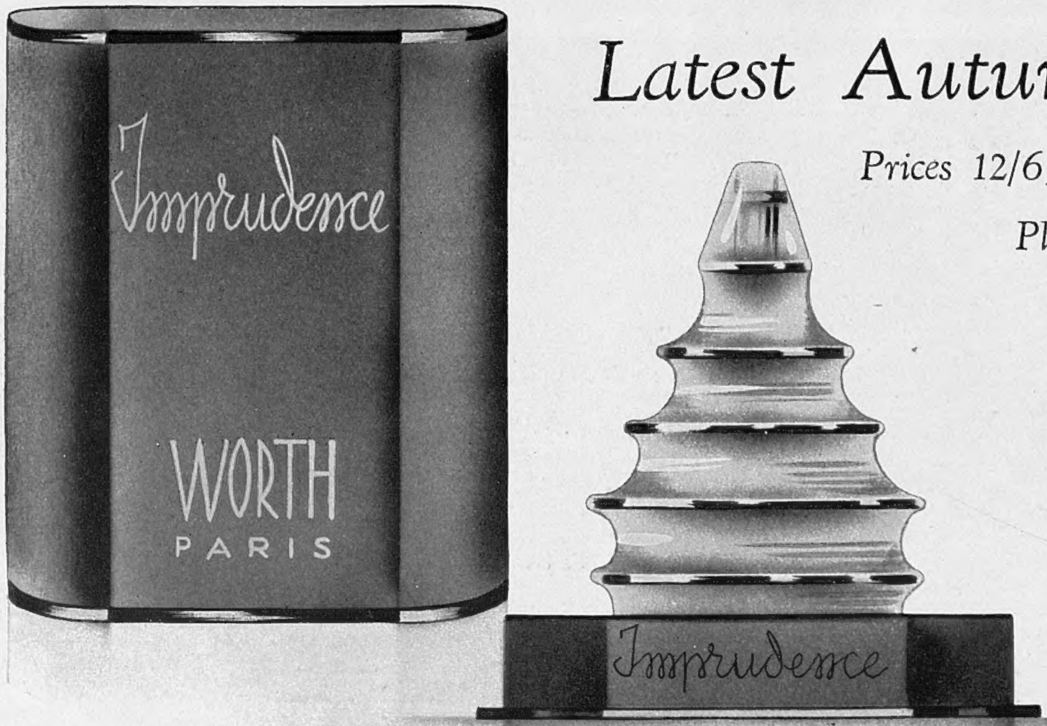

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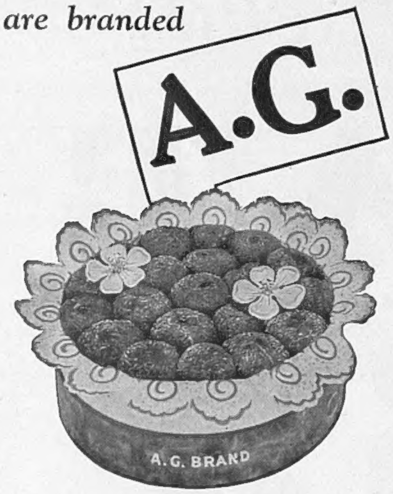

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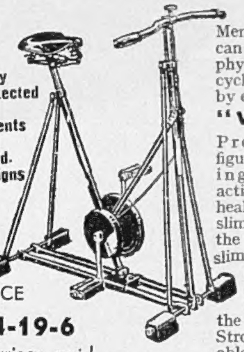

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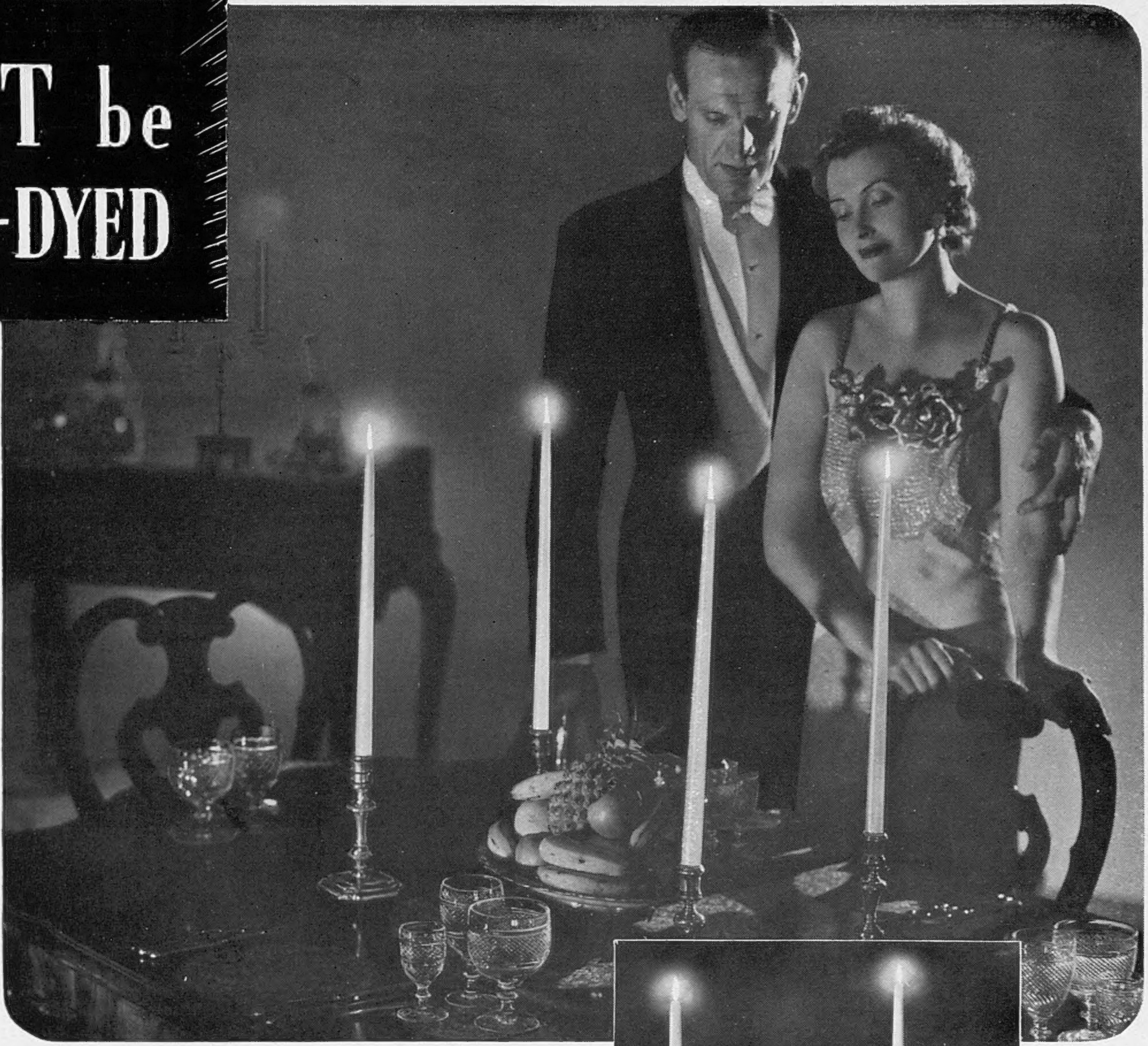

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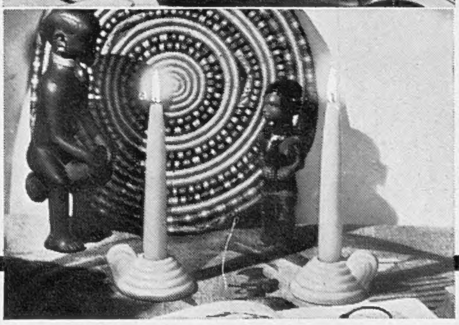

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THE DINNER-PARTY.—*(Continued from page xvi)*

" Hard words break no bones ! " said Tommy.

" If anybody had told me that this could happen, I would have called them nuts ! " said Celia.

" Truth is stranger than fiction ! " said Tommy.

There was a low moan from Celia, as if she could bear no more. Then the Vants' gates came in sight. Tommy turned in triumphantly. So much for Thorne ! Thought he could break a dinner engagement, did he ? Well, insult had been requited. He felt like a knight-errant—or was it an avenging angel ? And Nigel and nephew were just coming round the house, guns on their shoulders. They looked tired and dirty and happy.

" Hullo, Tommy ! " called out Nigel. " Been on the spree with Celia ? "

" This is no matter for jest ! " said Tommy austerely.

" It certainly isn't ! " exploded Celia. She got out of the car. Nigel's eyes narrowed.

" Cut along and have your bath ! " he said to the nephew. " Anything wrong, Celia ? "

" She has had a shock ! " said Tommy. " Treat her kindly—very kindly ! "

" What the devil are you talking about ? " asked Nigel.

" Nothing much," said Tommy. " I 'll be getting along now. Good-bye, Celia. I 'll be seeing you to-night, of course ? "

" To-night ? Oh, yes, of course ! " said Celia. She had never wished him many happy returns !

" I should be delighted if you would bring your nephew," said Tommy. " If I had known that he was staying here, I should, of course, have included him in my invitation."

" That 's very good of you," said Celia. " Sure that you can do with him ? "

" Quite ! " said Tommy. " Well, so long ! "

When he had gone, Celia tottered into the library. She sank into a chair.

" Oh, Nigel, Nigel ! " she moaned.

" Has Tommy gone quite mad ? " he demanded.

" He believes that he has saved me from what is worse than death ! " said Celia.

" What ! "

" He found this letter on the mantelpiece—read it ! " Nigel took it from her. His face changed.

" ' Dear Madam—My services as butler . . . excellent testimonials . . . sick of hotel work . . .' Who 's this ? "

" The head waiter at the Red Lion ! " said Celia. " You know—the one Douglas raved about. The letter came by the afternoon post. I suppose he 'd heard that you 'd given Jones notice. Anyway, I dashed off at once, before anybody else snapped him up. I knew you 'd be busy with that blasted party to-night. But while I was waiting for him, Tommy just came along and kidnapped me ! "

" Kidnapped you ? "

" Told me you 'd had an accident, and carried me off by force ! " said Celia.

" Celebrating his birthday by pretending it was the first of April ? " asked Nigel.

" Not that. He thought—Douglas had just telephoned, saying that he was going abroad, you see, and he had come here, and seen my letter to you on the mantelpiece. I 'd sealed it, so that Jones shouldn't read it. And Tommy imagined—well, that I 'd gone abroad too. He came pelting after me, and gave me the most touching lecture on marriage as an institution. I just couldn't disillusion him—he was enjoying himself so terribly ! Imagine Tommy—Tommy, of all people—doing anything as chivalrous as that ! "

" I always thought him a completely selfish bachelor," said Nigel. " Must have been wrong. Did you see Thorne, Celia ? "

" No. He left this morning. He told me so just before he went. He must have rung up Tommy from London or somewhere."

They looked at each other steadily. Then Nigel gave a little sigh. He drew his wife to her feet. He kissed her, as he had kissed her in the first days of their marriage. She kissed him, too, in the same way. Then he rang up the Red Lion, because you mustn't miss the chance of a good butler, even if empires fall and your wife suddenly becomes your wife again.

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